Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by riichu

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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess


The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess
9


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“Huh? Who’s that?”
“I-I’M KILTY BLANC...!”
“Ms. Komari... Ms. Komari...”
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The Terrorists' Endgame

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To the South

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Gold Rush!

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Star Cave Beasts

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Behind the Wickedness

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The Great Spelunking

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The Euphony of Corpses

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Sunny World

12.5
Moon, Stars, and Blood


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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess

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Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by **riichu**

YEN ON

New York

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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 9
Kotei Kobayashi
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter



"Please take care of Mulnite. Keep the world close to your chest."

That letter.

During the Vampire Riots, when I had been in the Dark Core Zone, Karla's brother gave me a letter from Yulinne Gandesblood.

I still couldn't figure out the mystery behind that message.

The world? My chest? Is that a metaphor of some sort?

Mom often told me I would "pull the world forward." I still didn't understand what she had meant by that.

Charlotte the camel had told me my mother was the boss of Full Moon. She was a mercenary who fought for world peace.

The Hero of Twilight.

Amazing, huh? I could never be like her.

My fate was to die in the middle of my journey, my goals unachieved.

I felt a sharp sting in my chest.

The physical pain wasn't that bad—it was my heart that hurt the most.

Vill and Colette. Esther and Nelia. The people of Lumiere Village. Were they all okay?

I reached out from pure, vehement loneliness.

I didn't want to lose at the hands of Star Citadel.

I wanted to reunite with Vill and everyone else ASAP.

But my body wouldn't move.

Mom, what am I supposed to do…?

"Easy! Come with me and kill everyone in your way!"

Someone grabbed my hand.

It wasn't Mom.

It was someone more wicked. Colder. A cynical yet sincere vampire.

A girl who'd been my foe countless times before—that little terrorist.



I opened my eyes with a *snap* and couldn't believe what I saw.

Spica La Gemini's upside-down smile filled my entire view.

I had to clench my gut hard to stop a shriek from escaping.

…Not yet. Keep cool.

Surely that wretched terrorist couldn't be in my room.

This had to be a dream or an illusion. That grin was sure to vanish from my sight given enough time.

"Te-ra-ko-ma-ri!! You're finally awake!!"

"Waaah?!"

The ceiling and the floor switched places.

She pulled the blanket off me, and I rolled off the bed like bacon wrapped around a stalk of asparagus and crashed loudly onto the floor.

It hurt. Tears came to my eyes.

My belly was in the most pain. I looked down and saw it was covered in bandages, a little blood oozing from it.

"…!"

The numbness dissipated from my head.

Right. Tremolo Parcostella almost killed me.

I was shocked I was still alive.

Or wait, could it be I'm in heaven…?

I looked around with dread.

The room was dark, brightened only by the light of the setting sun streaming in from the window.

It looked like the interior of a warehouse or something.

It smelled of mold and was full of wooden boxes and broken barrels.

Beside me was the shabby bed I'd been sleeping on.

But the weirdest thing of all…

"Good morning! How are you doing? Awful? Great!"

"…Are you real?"

"Hmm. Maybe. Maybe not."

Spica took a lollipop out of her pocket and put it in her mouth before taking a friendly step forward, like she'd just come across an old pal.

"But it's true that you're alive! Tremolo Parcostella of Star Citadel beat you to a pulp. You'd be dead if I hadn't shown up in the nick of time! Thank me."

"N-no way! You had no reason to help me!"

"Do you think one always needs clear motives to act? People's hearts are like falling leaves floating aimlessly on the wind. Looking for solid cause and effect for everything is nonsense."

"What're you talking about?! Don't use those big words!"

"Absolutely! I'm just talking out of my ass!"

"Could it be…you don't know how to hold a conversation?"

"Don't worry—I didn't just help you on a whim! The reason why I did is simple! Basically, that belly wound of yours looked so painful, I felt bad for you, and being the merciful person I am, I saved you!"

"Now that's talking out of your ass! There's no way a crazy terrorist like you would be that nice! You must be thinking about throwing me into your witch's cauldron and eating me!"

"You want me to eat you?"

"I don't!"

"Then it looks like I'm having Komari for dinner tonight!"

"STAY AWAY!!"

"Ah-ha-ha!" Spica cackled as she threw herself on me.

I desperately crawled away from her.

What in the world was going on?

I'd miraculously avoided Vill's prediction I would die in a week, but now that terrorist was gonna gobble me up anyway? Preposterous! But even stronger than my fear of impending danger was a simple question in my mind: *Why?*

Had Spica really nursed me back to health?

What happened to Tremolo and Lumiere and my friends?

"Komari!"

The moment Spica tried to bite my arm, I heard a voice.

I raised my head and looked at the door.

A girl dressed in peafowl-like clothing stared at me as if she'd just found her long-lost sister.

"L-Lingzi…? Lingzi, is that you?!"

"Thank goodness! You're awake…!"

Tears formed in Lingzi Ailan's eyes as she ran to me.

I noticed she had bags under her eyes, and her pretty green hair was disheveled. Her radiant smile contrasted with her worn-out appearance.

"Are you okay now? Does your belly hurt? You're really alive? You're not a ghost, are you…?!"

Spica turned around and bounced away from me.

"Terakomari is fine! She's even got enough pep in her step to play tag with me!"

"No way, that was just the adrenaline rush from the imminent danger! B-but whatever…" I turned to the green-haired girl. "Lingzi, thank goodness you're all right…! What happened? Why are we here? Also please give me a little room to breathe…"

"S-sorry!"

Lingzi pulled back a step, her cheeks rosy.

She fiddled with her hands.

"But," she said hoarsely, "but I'm so glad. You bled a lot, so I was really worried. I thought you would die."

"I'm surprised myself… I still can't believe I'm alive."

"You have Inverse Moon to thank for that. Spica helped me, too."

I looked at Spica, my eyes wide.

She stared back with an eerie smile.

"You heard her! Lingzi was fading when I picked her up. You were dying when I saved you. You two owe your lives to Spica La Gemini!"

I could not believe it.


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But I couldn’t doubt Lingzi.

Why was Inverse Moon in the Netherworld?

Why had they saved me?

These terrorists surpassed even the chimpanzee in their barbarity. Were they plotting something wicked behind the scenes? Would they slit my throat the moment I let down my guard?

“That’s right!” Spica yelled, as if she’d read my mind. “This is all part of my plan. You two are but tools for me to reach my goal. And I am but a tool for you to reach yours. We must use each other to move forward.”

“…What are you scheming? And be careful how you answer.”

“I’m just saying we should cooperate! If we let Star Citadel run wild, the Netherworld will rot and crumble from the inside out. You don’t want this to end in your defeat, do you?”

I was not expecting her offer.

Star Citadel was nothing but bad news, for sure. We could not leave them be.

But this girl was just as dangerous.

I’d almost died who knows how many times because of Inverse Moon.

“…I can’t trust you.”

“Even though I healed you? Listen, Inverse Moon also saved Lumiere Village.”

“Huh?”

“All your friends are A-OK, thanks to our rescue operations.”

So Vill and Nelia and Esther are alive?

I couldn’t take Spica’s words at face value, though.

She could be trying to trick me.

“Give me proof. Show me they’re all right.”

“Look into my memories with magic, then.”

“I can’t trust you without proof! I’m going back to Lumiere right now!”

“Hold your horses! You and I have an alliance to form! Why would I lie like that to my future comrade?”

“You’re no comrade! You beat me up! There’s gotta be a catch! Right, Lingzi?”

“Huh? Um, I—I…,” Lingzi stammered.

“There’s no catch! And if you won’t believe me, then I’ll just slash your belly open!”

“Lingzi, save me!!”

“A cat who catches mice is a good cat, no matter if it’s black or white! So get over your fear and just use me-ow! ♪”

She made cat ears with her hands and smiled. “Don’t be afraid of me-ow! ♪”

That only made me more scared.

We’re getting nowhere. I need someone reasonable to talk this over with.

“Stop it. You’re only making it worse.”

“Hmph?!”

Someone came up behind Spica.

It was a sagacious and cold Peace Spirit wearing frilly Eastern clothing.

Karla’s brother, Kakumei Amatsu.

“What’s the problem, Amatsu?! I was just trying to lighten the mood! Are you telling me I’m too old to act like a cat?! You calling me creepy?!”

“Sometimes one must say what they don’t want to.”

“That I agree with! But I command you to slice open your belly as punishment for hurting my feelings!”

“What happened to trying to lighten the mood?”

“Okay, you’re forgiven!”

I was at a loss for words.

I could not understand why Amatsu was here, much less why he would be bantering with this evil terrorist.

Are they friends?

Right as my heart was about to give out, Spica sneered at me coldly.

“Anyway, it’s obvious why you refuse to accept me—you don’t understand my ideals. Allow me to explain, no roundabouts, no tricks.”

She waved her red lollipop.

The terroristic little lady’s blue, starry eyes glowed.

"I'll tell you about Inverse Moon, the Netherworld, and Star Citadel. Once you get the gist, you'll be begging me to lend a hand. I know because you're the same as me."

☆

Lingzi helped me walk out of the warehouse.

Some ruins bathed in dusky orange came into view.

Amatsu explained this village had unfortunately been dragged into conflict and destroyed.

There were no villagers. A warped, lonely weathervane swayed with the wind atop the devasted land.

They said this wasn't an uncommon view in the Netherworld's countryside.

All because of those idiots waging war.

Star Citadel had to be stopped.

But the thing was…

"We're having stew for dinner. It's got lots of mushrooms, Your Highness's favorite."

"Whoa, that looks amazing! Good job, Tryphon!"

"I don't deserve the praise."

The apron-clad Sapphire gave a full bow.

The stew did look tasty, but I couldn't bring myself to partake of this man's cooking.

Tryphon Cross.

The cold-blooded murderer who had once plunged the Mulnite Empire into chaos smiled brightly as he served stew into a bowl.

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"Here. Water."

"Geh!"

The unforgettable foxgirl placed a cup on the table.

Fuyao Meteorite.

The terrorist who had gone on a rampage in the Heavenly

Paradise during the autumn of last year.

Her furry ears twitched, and her golden tail swayed.

Tied to her waist was the harrowing blade she had tormented me with, as though straight from a splatter flick.

I stared closely at the cup before fearfully looking at Fuyao.

"…You didn't put mustard in it or something, did you?"

Cloing. A switch flipped again.

"Oh, please! I wouldn't play such a cheap joke on you! If anything, I'd fill your cup with poison, but then there wouldn't be any point in saving you, would there?"

Cloing.

"And yet I wonder if there was any point in saving you. I cannot fathom what goes through Her Highness's mind."

Cloing.

"But whatever! We're comrades now! So let's put our grudges aside and get along!"

Cloing.

"To be clear, I have not forgotten what you did to me in the Heavenly Paradise. One day, you will fall at my hands."

Cloing.

"Just kidding! I don't want Her Highness to yell at me, so let's shake on it and make up, yeah?"

"…"

What is wrong with this girl…? I'm scared…

Is she pulling my leg, switching her manner of speech like that? Or does she actually have multiple personalities?

Either way, it would be best to stay away from this weirdo.

I'm surrounded by weirdos, though.

We had dinner in the middle of a roofless dining room.

Put simply: It was hell.

Never have I wanted to run away from a meal this badly.

Even dinner parties with the Seventh Unit, where there was always a 50 percent chance they would kill me, were more fun than this.

"How do you feel, Terakomarin?" asked the woman in a lab coat sitting opposite me.

Her listless eyes shone behind her glasses.

I had no idea who this was, but standard procedure was to put on airs during a first meeting.

"P-perfectly fine! Nothing can take down the Crimson Lord who'll turn the world into omelet rice!"

"That's good to hear. Medical treatment is beyond my expertise, so I wasn't sure. You'd be dead by now if it weren't for Dr. Kuya's teachings from way back when."

"Huh?"

So she healed me?

And wait, did this lady say Dr. Kuya?

"…You're also a doctor?"

"No, I'm Inverse Moon's investigator, Lonne Cornelius. I do all sorts of research, but lately I've been into human experimentation and high-speed shiitake mushroom cultivation. Pleased to meet you, Terakomarin."

"P-pleased to meet you."

Not sure I was really pleased, though.

It was obvious she was a crazy murderer by virtue of her belonging to Inverse Moon.

Exhibit A: She'd just mentioned human experimentation.

But I do kinda owe her my life…

"What's wrong, Terakomari?! You're not eating your stew!"

"Spica, I… Don't worry—I'm gonna."

"Don't be shy! I get your hesitance, though! Maybe Tryphon put needles in it."

"Oh, please." Tryphon sighed. "There's no point killing you now, Terakomari Gandesblood. You are no longer an enemy to defeat, but a tool to take advantage of."

"How can I trust you after what you did to Vill?"

"Fair, but don't forget our comrade Cornelius healed you."

"Did she, really? Maybe she put a small bomb in my gut."

"You're rude, you know that? I've already done that test with someone else," Cornelius chimed in.

"See?! She's a crazy terrorist like the rest of you!"

"Who cares? What matters is that you are in our debt. Who do

you think rescued the people of Lumiere? If it weren't for us, the village would have been in even more dire straits," said Tryphon.

"Wha…?! Th-that's right! I gotta get back to Vill and the girls…!"

Krssh!!

The moment I tried standing up, a fork plunged into the table right in front of me.

"Eep!" Lingzi yelped.

I froze, shocked.

"I cannot allow you to act of your own accord."

Tryphon's eyes glowed red.

It was his doing. His magic—no, his Core Implosion—could warp stuff around.

"You are Her Highness's tool. Repay your debt with obedience."

"C-can you dial back the psycho routine?! What if you'd stabbed me?!"

"I was trying to, actually. It just so happens that I have to use the position of the stars to determine the coordinates of where I send things with Treason's Spirit Gate, and I fumbled it due to the differences in the Netherworld's constellations."

"Spica, did you hear that?! He's cuckoo!"

"Mmm. This stew is missing a little something for us vampires. Terakomari, would you mind giving me some blood? Let's dye this stew red!"

"You're also cuckoo! Is there anyone sane here?!"

"Don't worry, Komari… I'm here with you." Lingzi cheered me up by grabbing my hand.

What a sweet girl. If it weren't for her, I would've cast aside my shame and reputation to shriek my lungs out and go back to being a shut-in.

"Thank you, Lingzi. You're like a flower blooming in the middle of a desert…"

"Y-you exaggerate… Besides, despite their wicked auras, I don't think Inverse Moon will hurt you now."

"Why? Didn't you just see what happened?"

"Because Spica helped me. I was passed out in the desert when she took me in and gave me food and water…"

I wanted to hear more about what was up with Lingzi. It was weird for her retainer, Meihua, to be absent, too.

"In any case," Tryphon said, "we can guarantee Lumiere's safety. There's no need for you to worry."

"What are you all scheming?"

"Your Highness, could you please explain already? This idiot Tryphon is going to break her if you don't hurry up," Amatsu cut in while reading the newspaper.

That's right! Amatsu's on my side, too!

I mean, he is my friend's brother. And he's given me advice a few times before now.

I better stay close to him… I kept holding Lingzi's hand and scooted my chair his way.

"…"

"…?"

He shot me a weird look.

Awkward, but I've got no room to worry about that now.

If anything happened, I would use him as a shield while I ran away with Lingzi.

"Right!" Spica smiled. "No use beating around the bush! Let's cut to the chase! First, let me ask you, Terakomari: What do you think is my ultimate goal?"

"Murder."

"*Bzzt!* The correct answer is world peace!"

"Bullshit!! Your lies are gonna make my ears fall off!!"

"I'll admit, my notion of world peace is a bit different from the kind you're picturing. I believe only those who deserve to be saved should be saved. Within Inverse Moon, we call these people, figuratively, shut-ins. The rest can die in a hole, for all I care."

Spica chewed her stew with delight and swallowed before continuing.

"I want to make a paradise consisting only of shut-ins. A happy place where only nice people live. A utopia where no one has to be killed and everyone can live out their lives to the fullest. Inverse Moon's slogan, 'Life is meant to be in the shadow of death,' is actually incomplete, I guess. It should be 'Life is meant to be in the

shadow of a *meaningful* death.'"

"Then why do you go around killing people like there's no tomorrow?"

"Didn't I just say? I don't mind getting rid of those who don't deserve to be saved. I only show kindness to the shut-ins who are just as kind as I am."

"Isn't that, like, super egotistical…?"

Still, she was beginning to make sense.

Basically, she wanted to live a fun life just with the people of whom she approved.

It was a little loony to call that "world peace," though.

"But anyway… Where are you making this paradise of yours, then?"

"Here."

"Here? In the middle of these ruins?"

"The scope of your imagination is as puny as your stature, huh! I don't mean these ruins—I mean the Netherworld itself. The perfect place to build my paradise!"

Lingzi held my hand tightly to stop me from blowing my lid.

Easy, Komari. Right now you have to listen to what she has to say.

"…Why the Netherworld? It's riddled with war."

"No logical reason. It's just because I have attachment to this place."

An uncharacteristically sentimental look came to Spica's face.

She had the appearance of a little girl, but the look in her eyes as she gazed up at the sky was that of an old traveler basking in nostalgia.

"A long time ago, I had this friend. We tried to make a peaceful paradise together, but a bunch of fools got in our way. I was expelled to the other side, the Foreworld, away from my friend. And then the Dark Cores sealed the entrances to the Netherworld."

"A friend? Fools? Dark Cores…? I'm not following…"

"By fools, I mean the six jerks who held a grudge against me. They called themselves Observatory."

"Where are they now?"

"Dead, probably. That was six hundred years ago."

"How are you still alive?"

"Guts!"

"If only it was that easy."

"Anyway, back then, the doors to the Netherworld were always open. But Observatory used the Dark Cores to close them. So I tried getting my hands on them in order to come here."

She wanted the Dark Cores to return to her homeland, where she had been separated from her friend… I was sure she wanted them to take over the world for evil.

"You've seen it before, too, right? The door opens when a Dark Core breaks. That's because the fools of Observatory used them to seal the doors. And the Dark Cores suck up the Netherworld's mana and supply it to the Foreworld. That's why there's no magic here. In exchange, you get to use all the magic you want over there."

"What the…?"

"Now you know how it works. Observatory did all that just to spite me, by the way. They wanted to dry up my paradise and lay waste to the Netherworld."

I had no idea this happened in the distant past, and hearing about it now shocked me to my core.

It never occurred to me that *this* could be the truth of the Dark Cores.

Not that I had any way to check if it was really the case.

"So to summarize…" Spica dunked her lollipop into her stew. "I want to reboot my paradise plans that got derailed before. That's why I'm here in the Netherworld. But while I was away, those scoundrels in Star Citadel plunged the whole place into war. I have to get rid of them."

"I see…?"

"Life is meant to be in the shadow of a meaningful death. The right people die the right way, and the wrong people die in vain. That's paradise, how the Netherworld is supposed to be. And that's why I don't like Star Citadel's massacring ways."

Now that I'd heard Spica out, I could see she had a consistent, logical reason for her actions.

Whether or not I agreed with her ideals, at the very least, we both wanted to get rid of Star Citadel.

But…

"Why did you reach out to me? We were enemies this whole time."

"Because Yusei is too strong. I need your help. Inverse Moon isn't up to the task by itself."

"Look for someone who can get along with you instead. Vill said there are a lot of barbarians like you out there in the world."

"The only people on my level are Yusei and you, Terakomari Gandesblood. You saw the disaster at Lumiere, right? The members of Star Citadel are a pack of amoral beasts. Are you just going to let them be?"

I cannot.

They made so many people suffer.

"…I'm going back to Lumiere. I'll fight with Vill and my friends."

"No." Spica put her stew-soaked lollipop in her mouth. "Then there would be no point in isolating you. Villhaze and Nelia Cunningham are strong, but they would never accept me."

"And you're saying *I* would accept you?"

"I'll kill you and add you to the stew if you don't."

"See?! You're crazy!"

"Is it me who's crazy or your expectations? Don't you think a truly peaceful world is one where we get to say 'I'll kill you' to one another without any thought? Don't you think it's this world that's wrong for turning dark jokes into reality?"

"What are you even saying?!"

"Ah-ha-ha! I'm saying I'm joking! It's okay; I know how open-minded you are! I'm sure you'll embrace my wickedness!"

The worst part is the wide-eyed look on her face…

She was right in one way, though—I would rather make friends with her if possible.

But I couldn't imagine that being easy, considering this bunch's behavior.

And I can't keep saying no, or she'll literally throw me down the drain…

"Cooperating would be for the best," Amatsu advised me. "Star Citadel is a major threat. They go multiple steps beyond Inverse Moon in mercilessness. Do you want to take your precious friends to a fight against them?"

"Ah…"

"If you don't want Villhaze and Nelia Cunningham to get dragged into the battle, then taking advantage of Her Highness would be the smartest move."

Vill and Esther were wounded already.

Colette's arm was… *I don't even want to think about it.*

I couldn't put them in any more danger.

Based on what Spica and Tryphon had said, Lumiere was safe, for now at least.

And that safety came with a price.

Inverse Moon had saved my friends—now I needed to help them in return.

"What will you do, Komari…?" Lingzi gave me a worried look.

I wasn't entirely sure yet, but the choice I had to make was becoming clear.

"…You promise my friends are okay?"

"Of course! Right, Amatsu?" said Spica.

"Yes. You don't need to worry about Lumiere Village."

Maybe I could trust him—Karla's brother.

I thought it over for a little while more before nodding.

"Okay. Let's work together for the time being."

"A smart decision befitting a scholarly intellectual!" Spica beamed.

She looked like a naughty kid who had just found a new toy.

Am I already regretting my decision?

"Everything's set, then. Together, we can build a bridge upon this parched night sky. Let's get rid of those pests, Terakomari!"

"Y-yeah…"

Spica held out her hand, and I hesitated momentarily before shaking it.

Her palm was surprisingly soft and warm; apparently, this terrorist's blood wasn't so cold.

I wonder what she thinks about me. Surely it's nothing good.

Or maybe she's also the kind of vampire who has trouble getting along with people.

Shaking her hand took me back a bit.

It was like meeting my past self.

"All right! Now that we've joined hands, I'll tell you about our plans!"

Spica shoved her hand into the bag on the chair next to hers.

She rummaged around in there for a while before plopping something on the table.

A ring…made of a lot of spheres?

It was too big to be a bracelet, but too odd to be decor.

"This is a Divine Instrument: the Nightsky Ring. It's from the Enchanted Lands' Starquake Agency. This armillary sphere can show the night sky of all worlds."

"Why do you have a treasure from the Enchanted Lands?"

"Because I stole it!"

Would it kill you to have an ounce of shame?

Look at Lingzi's face!

"The Nightsky Ring has received multiple graces from across the stars. For example…you can use it to determine the location of anyone whose blood you've registered with it. This is how I found Lingzi in the desert."

"Her blood was in there?"

"Must've been Shikai Gudo's doing. The blood of every important person in the Ailan dynasty, even that of Meihua Liang, was recorded here. He must've been plotting to control them all… But anyway…"

Spica gently caressed one of the Nightsky Ring's spheres.

A spot in the murky sky blinked.

"That's someone's location? Whose?"

"The Dead Maestro—Tremolo Parcostella's."

I gulped.

The eerie *cloing, cloing* of the biwa crossed my mind.

She's already up to something elsewhere in this world.

"Wait, but didn't you say you needed their blood?"

"I got some when I punched her! Why didn't I kill her, you ask? Please, Terakomari! Think harder! You gotta let her escape so we

can tail her to Star Citadel's hideout!"

"So…you know where it is?"

"Duh!" Spica smiled. "Far south from here, there's a mining city called Neoplus that's under the jurisdiction of the Toumor Republic. The population there's been skyrocketing from the gold rush. What a frivolous bunch."

"By the way, it's not gold they're mining," Cornelius explained, crossing her arms. "It's something even rarer and more valuable: Mandala minerals. They can react to people's willpower, and they're used for creating weapons in the Netherworld. The term 'gold rush' isn't quite accurate, so I propose we call it 'Mandala rush'…"

"I don't care what we're calling it. What you need to know is that Mandala minerals appear in places with high mana concentration. Do you realize what that means?" said Spica.

"Uhhh… Didn't you say there was no mana in the Netherworld?" I asked.

"What it means is there's a Dark Core in Neoplus!"

"…Wha—?"

A Dark Core? You mean, like, the *Dark Cores?*

One of those super-duper amazing Divine Instruments, of which there are only six in the world, and they give infinite mana and regenerative abilities to each race?

"The Dark Cores are clumps of mana. They each have different levels of power, but they spread mana simply by existing."

"H-hold on! Why are there Dark Cores in the Netherworld?!"

"Because there's Dark Cores in the Netherworld. There are six of them in the other world, and there's six here. Look, I have proof."

Spica took something out of her pocket.

Simply put, it was a sphere that glowed like a star. It looked like one of Nerzanpi's bullets, but this one exuded much stronger energy.

"This is one of the Netherworld's Dark Cores. I sneaked into Star Citadel's puppet state and stole the thing. It just so happens this one has retained its original form, since the wish imbued into it is different."

I was getting dizzy.

Spica fiddled with the Ultimate Divine Instrument with a grin on

her face.

"Mandala minerals pop up around the Dark Cores. As does Star Citadel. Do you understand the urgency of the situation?"

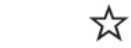
"You mean they're gathering the Netherworld's Dark Cores, too? And, uh, should you be hanging on to that…?"

"I don't intend to break it right now, and it's waaay safer with me than with them. Once someone gathers all six Dark Cores, they gain the ability to reflect their will onto the world. A lot of people will die if Star Citadel gets their hands on them."

"…"

I couldn't understand what Star Citadel's endgame was. But I understood the world was in danger.

I had to cool my exploding mind first. I grabbed my spoon and ate a mouthful of stew. It was surprisingly tasty.



The circumstances were pretty complicated, but the solution was simple: Defeat Star Citadel.

According to the Nightsky Ring, their hideout was in the city of Neoplus, far south, where they were (allegedly) trying to mine a Dark Core.

If the Dark Core fell into their hands, the flames of war would engulf the whole world.

They had to be stopped. But…

"…I can't trust Spica."

"She is a little scary…"

"Did she do anything to you, Lingzi?"

"She…sucked my blood a few times."

"She must pay!! I'm gonna go yell at her!!"

"W-wait! Don't run—you still aren't fully healed!"

"……Gah. You're right… My belly hurts…"

I squatted in place, tears in my eyes.

It was night. Lingzi and I were in a room in the ruins, getting ready for bed.

We were supposed to head south tomorrow; I had to rest while I could.

Yet I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't stop thinking about Inverse Moon, Star Citadel, and my friends back in Lumiere Village.

All my vexations were pushing me beyond my limits.

I went back to bed and lay down to rest my wounded body.

Calling Lingzi's name, I stared at the ceiling.

"What happened to Meihua? I wasn't sure if I should ask, but…"

"Meihua is…" Lingzi hesitated before responding from the other bed. "I heard she's in Neoplus. The Nightsky Ring says so, apparently."

"Why…? Wait, I guess I know why."

You had no way of knowing where a collapsed Dark Core would send you. Nothing guaranteed Lingzi and her retainer would appear in the same place.

"Spica said Meihua isn't in terrible trouble, at least. The Nightsky Ring can only pinpoint the locations of the living… But I'm still worried."

"Yeah… We've got no choice but to go to Neoplus, huh…"

Lingzi frowned anxiously.

She had been through so much while I had been on my whimsical journey.

I found just the thought of being with the princess of a terrorist group spine-chilling.

"…I'm also worried about the Enchanted Lands," Lingzi whispered. "A lot of places will be affected by the Willow Sword's breaking. The world must be changing as we speak…in an irreversible way."

"Yeah…"

"Komari, did you hear a voice when you opened the gate?"

"Huh? Whose?"

"I guess I was just hearing things."

"…Wait, what did it say?"

"I think it said something about reestablishing order. And killing… Then pictures came flooding into my head, including the sight of someone being freed from their shackles…"

What in the world? Unfortunately, there were too many people I could think of who would talk about killing.

I didn't think it was right to brush it off as just Lingzi hearing things, though.

"…It's okay. I'll protect you, no matter what."

"Eh?"

"The world may be changing, but my wish to be with you hasn't, Lingzi."

"Komari, do you enjoy being with me…?"

"Yeah. I feel at ease around you, too. There's something special about you."

She was one of the few people I knew who had a good head on her shoulders. That I was able to hold an actual conversation with her was really special.

"You too." Lingzi's face turned red. "…You're special to me, too. I don't want just to be protected. I'll do what I can to help you in turn."

"R-really?"

"I'm just a regular person who gave up on being special, but that doesn't mean I don't have to fight. I want to do what I can. I want to support you."

Lingzi Ailan had given up her title, Gongzhu of the Enchanted Lands, but she still had the will to change the world. I could feel it.

Feeling reassured, I took her hand.

"Thanks! Of course, let's help each other out! That's what friends are for!"

"Yes. And I'm also your wife."

"…"

How could she say something so embarrassing as if it was nothing?

The weirdest part of it all was that I didn't feel a shred of sickoness—the kind Vill usually oozed—coming from her.

The moment after my brain froze as I tried to come up with what

to say in reply, I heard a *boom!*

The explosion was nearby. Lingzi's and my screams rang out as we flew through the air.

The walls and ceiling had been blown away, the beds were wrecked, and the world was spinning around me. I felt like I was gonna puke. The blast was also hot as hell, and the rocky rubble devastated our surroundings.

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"Raid! We're under attack! They grew tired of waiting! My Null Night Blade shall strike them down!"

Outside, Fuyao cackled.

Spica and Tryphon woke up and ran out of their rooms.

…What? Am I dreaming? Can I keep sleeping, then?

A second explosion hit another building while I was trying to escape reality.

We're gonna die if we stay here.

I endured the pain in my belly and held Lingzi tightly to protect her.

"K-Komari, are you okay?!"

"Are *you* okay, Lingzi?! Damn it, why do they keep blowing up the buildings I'm in?! Spica, what's going on?!"

"Mmm." Spica squatted down and licked her lollipop. "To tell the truth, we've been surrounded by the enemy for three days."

"Wha…?"

"The Aruka Kingdom's troops! Stuff happened, and they're our enemies now!"

"What stuff?!"

"You see the Dark Core I have? I stole it from Aruka!"

"Well, no wonder they're attacking!"

"They've been pursuing us the whole time. Looks like they finally found our hideout. They were watching from outside the castle walls, and I guess they took advantage of our needing sleep to attack!"

I already want to undo our alliance.

I had one or two or three words to say to Spica, but I realized yelling at her wouldn't get us to safety.

"Lingzi, let's book it! We'll use them as decoys!"

"Hey! You run, and I'll kill you!"

I grabbed Lingzi by the arm and ran away without looking back.

The pain from my belly wound was practically killing me, but I had no time to waste on tears.

Because I knew that getting involved with Inverse Moon *would* kill me.

"Which of you Arukans is ready to become rust on my sword?!"

"Dear me. I would rather avoid getting bloody… But I'll take it as a good opportunity to adjust my Treason's Spirit Gate."

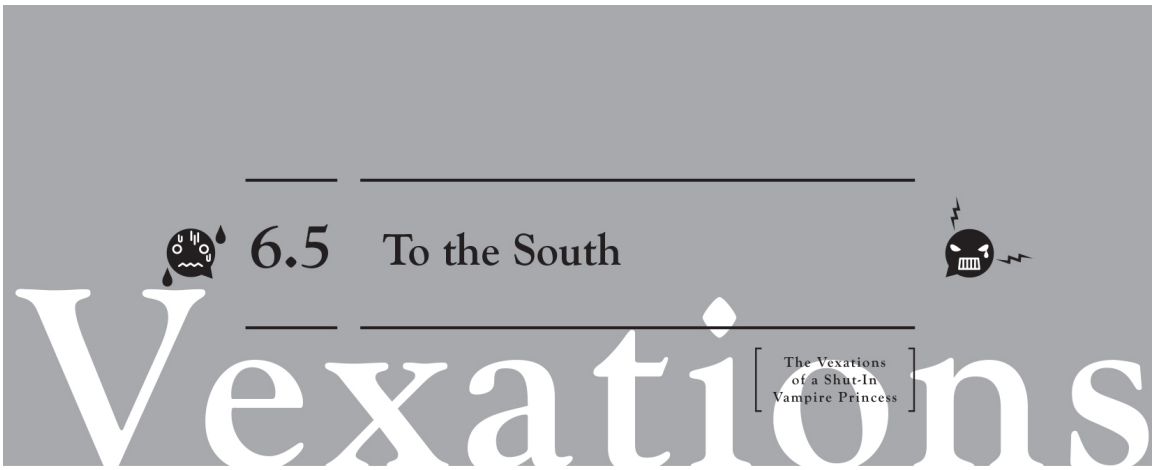
The crazies were ready to run berserk.

Cannon fire continued to flatten the ruins without mercy.

"Oh well." Spica sighed as she stood up. She took another lollipop out of her pocket and pointed it to the sky, saying, "Fuyao, Amatsu, Tryphon, Cornelius! Take these guys down and catch Terakomari! As punishment, I'll suck her blood until she's nothing but skin and bones!"

Not skin and bones!

Lingzi and I almost tripped multiple times from the incessant blasts as we ran away from the ruins.



"Haaaaaaaaaah…… I thought I was dead."

Karla Amatsu looked at the ceiling and loosened up like a slug.

Koharu was wolfing down a strawberry parfait in front of her.

"Much appreciated," the ninja-girl said in an emotionless voice. "Without you, we would be Sapphire dinner by now."

"And it would be your fault! Why did you attack them out of nowhere?! I did not raise you to be such a rude girl!"

"Sorry, I was worried you were in danger…"

"Aw."

"Also, Sakuna Memoir was thirsty for blood, and I thought a battle couldn't be avoided. She's one scary lady."

"…"

A café in the Netherworld.

Karla glanced toward a corner of the establishment. Silver girl Sakuna Memoir stabbed a *monaka* wafer cake repeatedly with a cake knife while mumbling curses.

"They'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay…"

She's sick.

That girl had given them a terrible time.

The survey team crossed the Gate and was transported to a country called the Polar Empire. The Shade Kilty Blanc had told them the countries of the Netherworld were similar to the countries of the

Foreworld. The Polar Empire had to be a reflection of the Polar Union.

But that wasn't the issue.

The Sapphires of the Polar Empire had sounded their alarms at the mysterious intruders who appeared out of nowhere, and the combatants of the survey team (mainly Sakuna Memoir) had come in ready to kill everyone and everything.

A battle began. Sakuna twirled her staff without mercy and charged first, while the Sapphires responded in disarray.

I really thought we were dead.

Karla had managed to get them off the hook with her powers of persuasion. One wrong step, and they would have been annihilated in the first minutes here.

"…I do have my worries about Ms. Sakuna, although I understand how she feels."

"Look at that scary look on her face. Can't she smile a little?"

"Nothing about this situation is worth smiling over."

"What if we try tickling her?"

"She'll kill you."

"I'm joking," Koharu mumbled before eating a mouthful of parfait.

Meanwhile, Sakuna kept oozing black aura, reciting, "Ms. Komari Ms. Komari Ms. Komari." It was clear her mind was on the brink.

That didn't just go for Sakuna Memoir, however.

Everyone on the survey team was in a similar situation.

Nelia, Lingzi, Leona, and Prohellya—all the girls who had disappeared were irreplaceable to their respective countries.

"Let's not mind her. Who knows what she'll do if we try anything? Plus, I'm honestly scared of her, so let's just stay awa—"

"Ms. Karla."

"Eep?!"

Sakuna looked directly at her.

Her eyes lacked warmth. She looked ready to kill a couple hundred people.

"Y-yes? What is the matter?"

"Aren't we taking too much time?"

"Huh?"

"How long are we staying here? It's already been thirty-three minutes and fifty-eight seconds. Oh, thirty-four minutes now. We're wasting our time… Ms. Komari could be sad and lonely out there… Ahhh…"

Oh no. She's furious.

Strawberry in her mouth, Koharu stood up posthaste and hid behind Karla.

"Lady Karla, I'm scared."

"You're supposed to be my bodyguard! You have a duty to defend me no matter what!"

"I'm using my right to abandon my duties temporarily."

"You have no such right!"

"What are you mumbling about?" Sakuna asked.

"Bwuh?! J-just saying that I should take this parfait as reference for the Fuuzen, ha-ha."

"Ms. Komari is looking for help somewhere out there. She's waiting for me. Why must God get in my way…? I must kill Him…"

Waves of frigid air were emanating from Sakuna.

There was no mana or Dark Core in the Netherworld. She shouldn't be wasting her magic like that.

But I can't warn her about it.

I'm too afraid to.

Oh, it's over. I'm going to be turned into an ice statue… As Karla began giving up on life…

"E-eee-excu— Excuse me!!"

…a cracking voice echoed in the café.

Karla, Koharu, Sakuna, and the rest of the survey team turned to the source of it.

It was a little—no, a not so young girl.

She wore black, shadowy clothes. In contrast, her skin was paler than the Polar Union's snow. But due to her anxiety, her face was as red as an apple. At least, what they could see of it from under her hood.

What is she, though? Doesn't look like a Peace Spirit or a Warblade, much less a beast-folk…

In any case, Karla smiled gently.

"What's the matter? Where's your mommy?"

"…?!?!?!"

The black-clad girl seethed.

Not even a princess being paraded around after her kingdom was taken over would make such an expression of pure humiliation.

She clenched one hand into a fist and shuddered, taking deep breaths.

"I-I'm Kilty Blanc…!"

Huh? What did she just say? Karla felt a question mark pop up above her head. The girl threw back her hood.

Black hair, white skin, red cheeks, teary eyes.

Ten out of ten people would describe her as being a total sweetie.

She took a deep breath before saying, "I-I'm here as I promised…! T-to tell you about the…Netherworld…"

""""……""""

The reason why the survey team was hanging out in the café was to meet up with their guide in the Netherworld, the Shade Kilty Blanc.

But…how should I put it…?

…She's not at all like I imagined??

"Shades can…control their shadows to send them to other worlds… But I'm just a messenger and don't show my face often, so I'm not used to being seen… S-so I'm sorry if I don't look like what you imagined…"

She wouldn't meet their eyes.

She kept her head down, her back hunched, and her fingers interlocked even as she sat.

"I feel like someone different when I'm a shadow. I get bold… But I'm not used to talking in person… I wish I could talk big like when I'm a shadow, but I think a squirt like me acting all daring would look silly, objectively speaking… U-um, is there something in my hair?"

"No, no. You're such a good girl."

Koharu sat next to Kilty and patted her head.

She's not what I imagined, but hey, everyone has their insecurities.

Better not poke too much fun at her.




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"So you're a gloomy girl, huh? Heh. A gloomy shadow."

"Uh……"

"Koharu! Be serious! I'm so sorry, Kilty," said Karla.

"It's okay. I know I'm gloomy…" Kilty chuckled self-derisively.

"Excuse me," Sakuna interjected timidly. "Could you please tell me about Ms. Komari? You know something about her, don't you?"

"Y-yes. That's what we were supposed to be doing. Nobody cares about my gloominess… Take a look at this."

She rummaged through her backpack and took out an old scroll, then unrolled it on the table.

It was a map of the Netherworld.

"There're so many countries I don't recognize. And the Heavenly Paradise and Mulnite are in different places… The land itself is different, too."

"Yes. Legend says the second world was a mostly uninhabited wasteland, but it became like it is now by copying the first world…"

"Copy? The first world?"

"Ah, um, there are more important things to discuss at the moment…"

Kilty pointed to a spot on the map.

A little way off from the middle of the Netherworld was JOULE VILLAGE.

"I think Villhaze, Esther Claire, and Nelia Cunningham are here."

"Wha…?"

Karla was shocked. Kilty had already found them?

"Not exactly in Joule, but in a hidden village near it… Lumiere Village. There was conflict near there, and Mulnite soldiers were sent there for repairs. According to my associate hidden in the village… the three of them are all right."

"Three?" Sakuna repeated anxiously. "What about the rest…? What about Ms. Komari…?!"

"Prohellya Butchersky and Leona Flatt haven't been found. As for Terakomari…I received a report saying Spica La Gemini abducted her."

"What…?!"

Karla's brain couldn't process it all.

Kilty cast her eyes down apologetically.

"My associate camel said Terakomari, Nelia, Villhaze, and Esther were teleported and traveling together. They crossed the desert on their way to the Mulnite Empire, but they fought Star Citadel in Lumiere Village… Terakomari was the only one the Wicked God Slayer made off with…"

The Wicked God Slayer—Spica La Gemini.

What was the terrorist who plunged the Six Nations into chaos doing in the Netherworld?

"…Inverse Moon destroyed my family," Sakuna said in a soul-chilling voice. "They did terrible things to Ms. Komari…and to Ms. Villhaze, too. They only think of people as tools. We can't let them run free." She turned to Kilty. "Ms. Kilty, how did that happen? Is Inverse Moon trying to hurt Ms. Komari again?"

"I don't know what Spica La Gemini is thinking… We have a spy in Inverse Moon, but they haven't found anything… And Inverse Moon is not our only enemy. In fact, I believe Star Citadel is a bigger threat…"

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"Eep?!" Kilty shrieked under Sakuna's sharp glare.

It was no surprise a frightening expression had come to her face. Sakuna had lost her family to Inverse Moon and had led a life tainted in bloodshed because of them.

"I know because I was there. Inverse Moon is more dangerous. Ms. Karla, we must go find Ms. Komari right now," said Sakuna.

"But we don't have any clue—"

"We do, actually," Kilty said fearfully. "Like I said, we have a spy in Inverse Moon. They're fickle and only give us intel on a whim, so maybe they've changed sides, but…"

Karla sighed.

"Not a very good spy. Perhaps we shouldn't trust their intel."

"H-huh? Did the former Goddess not tell you…?"

"Huh? About what?"

"It's your cousin…Kakumei Amatsu."

"…"

Karla's brain broke.

…What? Kakumei?

My brother, who's been missing for so long?

"Amatsu sent a pigeon for the first time in a while the other day… but the note was in code, apparently. It said, 'The moon is in the golden sea.'"

"W-wait a second! My brother is in the Netherworld?! You've met him?!"

"Huh? H-he is a member of the mercenary group Full Moon… I've met him, and he's helped me plenty before…"

After the previous Goddess disappeared, Karla found out a massive secret from the letter the woman had left behind.

She had learned the former Goddess was herself from the future, that the world would crumble if Inverse Moon was left to their own devices, and that she had to protect Komari so she wouldn't vanish.

But the note hadn't mentioned Kakumei Amatsu. Yet from what Kilty said, her future self should have known where her brother was.

Why?

Why didn't I tell myself??

The confusion was killing her.

"Oof, you hear that? She stole him from you," said Koharu.

The shock was killing her, too.

"Um, going back on topic," Kilty said timidly. "We've also heard of sightings of someone who could be Spica La Gemini… Nothing for certain, but her appearance does stand out."

"Where is she?"

"D-down south… Far south of the God Slayer Tower in the middle of this map, and going off the reports, it sounds like Inverse Moon is heading even farther south… Considering Kakumei's message, they must be going here…"

She pointed to the borderline between the Lapelico Kingdom and the Toumor Republic.

The map said MINING CITY OF NEOPLUS in sloppy handwriting, obviously added afterward.

"It's an artificial city built recently, a ghostly place where greed

storms… There's been a gold rush lately, so many mercenaries are gathering there… I've been ordered to go there with you in place of my busy boss to rescue Terakomari."

"…!"

Their destination was set.

Star Citadel, Inverse Moon, Komari…and Karla's long-lost brother.

There was so much to do, but it would all be solved once they were south—so thought Karla.

☆

Down south, on the border of the Toumor Republic, stood the mining city of Neoplus.

It had been eight years since the once-quiet rural village was transformed via a government development initiative into a land tainted by greed.

Violence was part of daily life here, to the point it had been named the most dangerous place in the Netherworld that wasn't an active war zone.

The only orderly place in the entire city was the governor's mansion, situated in the best district of the city and protected by thick walls.

In an office in the manor's luxurious hall, two people faced each other.

One was a girl wearing a golden hair ornament.

She had on a revealing, exotic outfit as she sat haughtily on a shiny golden chair. Her exposed skin was naturally dark, browner than someone paler could attain through suntanning. She did not belong to one of the six common races.

"So? You lost the battle?" she asked, spinning the toes of her crossed leg.

"No, I have not lost," answered a girl in shambles, like a soldier who'd escaped death by a hair.

Her clothes were frayed, and her face was swollen, the injury from the punch she had taken still unhealed.

The traveling biwa bard Tremolo Parcostella, Dead Maestro of Star Citadel, stared at the girl's bare feet while making an excuse.

"To begin with, Nefty, there's no need to fixate on the outcome of that single battle. When you look at the big picture, it's clear Star Citadel's wish will come true. While it may appear as though we lost to a third party, the reality is…"

"Shut your trap already!"

"Wah!"

Tremolo wobbled as Nefty poked her with her gaudily pedicured toes.

The dark-brown-skinned girl, Nefty, rose to her feet in irritation.

"Are you taking this seriously? First Nerzanpi, and now you. Do you think you can just get thrashed and come crawling to me for help? Where's your shame?"

"As I said, this isn't a matter of victory or defeat. What must be first on our minds is whether our wish comes true."

"Oh, give me a goddamn break! Grow up and own up to your mistakes! Keep spouting nonsense, and I'm locking you up in a coffin to see if you like the mummy life."

"Please listen to me. I made a strategic retreat. I couldn't have won back there. You know how strong the Wicked God Slayer is, don't you?"

"Sure, but what pisses me off is your attitude. Get on your knees and beg if you want my help. I'll even grace you with a foot-stomping."

"But we're allies…"

"Are you saying there's no sense of respect between friends?"

"I think it's a miracle we're working together. We joined hands under Yusei's ideals despite being like oil and water. Goes to show that she really is the incarnation of harmony."

"Stop changing the subject! Ugh…whatever. Let's move on."

Nefty's veil fluttered as she leaned back.

She glared at Tremolo and asked, "So? Yusei's mad. What're you gonna do?"

“How mad are we talking?”
“Hmm, let’s see…”
Nefty looked down and to the side.




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There was a plushie in the form of a bunny-like creature sitting beside her.

After exchanging glances with the stuffed animal for a while, she nodded.

"Uh-huh." She turned to look at Tremolo again, a naughty grin on her face. "Poor you! She wants you dead!"

"I shall clear my name."

"*…Tsk.* You're no fun."

Faint, dusky sunlight seeped into the office.

Bored, Nefty sighed before hugging the bunny plush.

She fiddled with it with one hand, pulling its ear and kneading its belly, as she called to Tremolo.

"What about the Dark Core?"

"A new one hasn't been found yet. By the way, Spica La Gemini took the one we lent the Arukan army."

"You saved the worst news for last?!"

Nefty threw the plushie at Tremolo. She gracefully caught it, and her lips curved up in a sneer.

"Not like you have any good news to speak of. You've been mining Star Cave for eight years now and have nothing to show for it."

"That's a totally different thing! Besides, I was always against it! It was never a good idea to hand the Dark Core to the Arukan army, no matter how strong it made them!"

"You're questioning Yusei's judgment?"

"Ugh… You have a point…"

"In any case, the plan has entered its next phase. You seem to think I came here crying for help, but the truth is I already have a scheme of my own cooked up."

Tremolo threw the plushie back. Nefty caught it sloppily.

"…Then why are you here?"

"Because Neoplus's Star Cave is the perfect stage for the decisive battle. With the Varmints' power, nobody can stand in our way. In return, I'll help you look for the Dark Core."

"Spica's coming here?"

"The Wicked God Slayer let me go, which means she's ready to

come. And she and Terakomari won't be alone. She's come to reap the seeds of tragedy she sowed eight years ago."

"I don't get what you're saying."

Cloing. A bending sound.

Tremolo turned around as she put her fingers on the strings.

"There is one more reason I came back here: I wanted to see your face."

"What? You're creeping me out."

"You're a comrade in our mission to fulfill our wish. I wanted to make sure you were doing well."

"…"

"Hee-hee… After we've dealt with our enemy, let's go to the Foreworld to rescue Lady Nerzanpi. It seems she hasn't been killed yet."

"I'm not so sure about that. Knowing how weak she is, I think she might've offed herself already."

"That can't be… Now then, I'll be on my way."

Cloing, cloing. The bard sounded her biwa.

Nefty hugged the plushie and looked up at the ceiling.

Countless coffins decorated her surroundings.

People could live a second life so long as their body remained—such was the belief of Nefty's homeland.

Every member of Star Citadel had their own special view of death.

Even if humanity perished, there was a way to salvation.

"Yusei, we are going down the right path, yes?"

Nefty's whisper echoed vainly in the quiet darkness.

She was talking to the plushie, but no answer came back.



We traveled for one week south of the ruins before arriving at our destination—the mining city of Neoplus.

Spica said there was an unprecedented gold rush going on in Neoplus, though people weren't going for *gold* but rather this weird mineral called Mandala.

The mysterious precious gem appeared wherever there was a Dark Core.

The deposit had been found a little over a decade ago. Before then, Neoplus had been an unassuming village, but development accelerated eight years ago, and now it was a big city with a population in the tens of thousands.

Mercenaries from all over the country went there looking to get rich quick.

You could feel the vehement greed in the air. So much so, I was getting heartburn just walking down the streets.

"We're finally here! Okay, people, let's find some good citizens and extort them to give us a place to stay tonight!" Spica said.

"W-w-wait! What the heck are you suggesting?!"

"I'm joking!"

"It sure didn't sound like it!"

"Wha—?! No way, you didn't take it like that?! Well, you're not the slaughter commander for nothing! But think carefully about it. The police or the army would come if we tried killing or robbing

innocents. Why would we make our work harder for ourselves on purpose?"

"…"

Why am I being treated like the weirdo…?

She's the weirdo…

"…Spica, I really don't think we can make this work."

"Oh, please. Even the greatest enemies will work together when their boat is about to be capsized."

"Do you really want to cooperate?"

"Of course! That's why I caught you. And if you run away again, I'm frying you up and gulping you down!"

Lingzi shivered and hid behind me.

I get you, Lingzi. Who wants to get eaten by this weirdo?

After the whole ordeal at the ruins, Spica had caught us in the blink of an eye.

Now that I thought about it, that was no surprise. There's no way I could have escaped these snappy terrorists.

So Lingzi and I had been forced to join their party and make the weeklong trek to Neoplus.

Well, at least we weren't killed.

I had no choice but to cooperate with Inverse Moon.

"Hmm?" Spica peered into Lingzi's eyes, smiling. "What's up? Are you afraid of me?"

"I-I'm not…"

"You are! I'll put a collar on you so you can't escape!"

"Stop it! What if you give her some weird fetishes?!" I shouted.

"You want one, too? Okay, two pets are better than one!"

"Over my dead bodyyy!!"

Spica cackled as she tackled me.

Having a cat's nine lives wouldn't be enough to survive as this weirdo's pet. We ran in circles for all we were worth.

Someone sighed. "…Your Highness, we shouldn't be drawing attention to ourselves."

Startled, I turned around.

The fox beast-folk Fuyao Meteorite gave the Wicked God Slayer an annoyed look.

"What's that, Fuyao? You're opposing me?"

"They have no reason to run at this point."

"But I heard women and children aren't safe in Neoplus. I have to keep them on a leash to protect them!"

"They're not little girls. Besides, alliances should be equal."

"……You have a point!"

Crack. The collars in Spica's grip broke.

With her bare hand?! But there was something more surprising: "Fuyao… You have common sense…?"

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"I've got it in spades! Think about it! Leading two hideous pets around would harm Her Highness's reputation, duh!"

"What?! Hideous…?!"

Cloing.

"…Who cares about her reputation? In any event, there's nothing to be gained by being rough with an ally. Take the pet idea too far, and they'll bite the hand that feeds them."

"Komari, does this girl have a split personality…?" asked Lingzi.

"I—I dunno… Maybe she's just trying to be edgy and pretending to have one…"

Either way, it was creepy.

Like boss, like underling.

"Whatever! Time to talk business!" Spica smiled from ear to ear and grabbed Fuyao by the arm. "Let's go somewhere to sit down. Any recs, Fuyao?"

"How could I have any? This is the first time I've been here—" She cut herself off.

Fuyao's fox ears stood up as she looked all around.

Her eyes stopped at a corner of an alley. *That's…an old well?*

"What's wrong?"

"No…"

Cloing. A switch flipped.

Then I saw something strange.

An expression came over Fuyao's face unlike that of either of her personalities; rather it was like that of a small child afraid of a ghost.

"…Nothing… Let's…look for a place. Quickly."

Fuyao's suggestion and demeanor were unlike her.

Lingzi and I froze in shock, and even Spica's eyes grew wide as though saying, *Who is this?*

"Something is up. Did anything you eat make you sick?"

"I'm okay… I ate the usual for breakfast…"

"Something is clearly wrong. You aren't acting like either of your personalities."

Cloing. A switch flipped again.

"I'm telling you it's nothing. Stop worrying."

Fuyao turned back into her usual murderous self.

She held her temple as she walked away.

What was that? Something was clearly wrong… But oh well. Whatever.

I forgot about it and looked for a restaurant.

☆

Inverse Moon split into two groups.

Simply put, one was the main team and the other the backstage team.

The main team's job was to fight Star Citadel directly and rescue Meihua, and it was composed of me, Lingzi, Spica, and Fuyao.

The backstage team would assist the main team by getting intel on Neoplus and doing stuff behind the scenes. Its members were Amatsu, Tryphon, and Cornelius.

Why do I always get thrown into the offensive party?

I couldn't speak my mind, however. I swallowed my complaints.

And so we began a strategy meeting in whispers at the bar.

"The Mandala mining site is called Star Cave. The Nightsky Ring says Tremolo and Meihua are there!"

The place was packed despite it being noon. We girls were clearly out of place among all the beefy mercenaries, but neither Spica nor Fuyao seemed to care.

"Which means! They're looking for the Dark Core inside Star Cave! We gotta stop them, or the world as we know it will end!"

"Where is this Star Cave…?" Lingzi asked.

"At the center of Neoplus," Tryphon answered.

We'd met up with him at the bar. Amatsu and Cornelius were occupied elsewhere.

"I just checked, and the area around the entrance was full of mercenaries. And you need a license to go inside."

"…What a drag. Let's just blast our way in."

"Fuyao, you're too violent. The mercenaries have a lovely rule that they gang up on anyone who tries to sneak in. Yusei might find us if we make a ruckus. We must be cautious."

Now that was surprising. I thought for sure they wouldn't care and charge in.

At the very least, that's what the Seventh Unit would've done.

Hold up. Are my guys wilder than terrorists?

"You have to be admitted by the authorities to get a license. The authorities being a prefectural governor of the Toumor Republic. There is an office here in Neoplus where they manage all government duties."

Tryphon took a piece of paper out of his pocket. It was a map of Neoplus. He pointed to the government office.

"…What kind of guy is this governor?"

"The current governor is Count Sandberry. Mining restrictions were greatly loosened since they were appointed, and they have immense support from the mercenaries."

"Mm-hmm."

I curled up while sipping my tomato juice.

I wasn't good with important people. I tended to mess up and make them mad.

"Oh, by the way," Tryphon added, a serious look on his face, "even if we get the license, we must be careful when exploring Star Cave. We can't be found by Star Citadel, of course, but besides that, the mercenaries at the guild said that monsters known as Varmints have been appearing recently."

"What are they?"

"Amatsu and Cornelius are investigating as we speak. Supposedly, they look like black beasts, and there are many of them living in Star Cave. Mandala mining hasn't seen much progress as of late because they've been attacking people."

That was ominous.

Are they more ferocious than Lapelico's armies?

"I see. That might be Star Citadel's defense system," Fuyao said.

"We are considering the possibility."

"Yeah!" Spica nodded. "Beware, then! Thanks, Tryphon! Now we know what to do next! Let's worry about the Varmints later and focus on Whateverberry to snatch a license out of them, yeah?"

"Peacefully, if possible."

"There's no vampire more peaceful than I!"

Spica's smile grew wider, while Fuyao grabbed a piece of fried tofu.

"Good work. You've earned a reward."

"Thank you, but I merely did my job."

"How about a lollipop?! You like 'em, don't you?!"

"No, thank you."

"You're welcome!"

"Gweh!"

Spica shoved the candy into Tryphon's mouth.

"BLEERGH!" His death throes echoed around us.

I had suspected as much, but there are some serious abuses of power in Inverse Moon, aren't there?

"All right, people!" Spica clapped her hands. "Our first destination is the government office! Let's go get that license!"

It can't be as easy as you make it sound.

I knocked back my tomato juice, feeling an ominous premonition about what awaited us.

☆

"Okay. You can have a license."

The government office was like a castle, surrounded by tall walls.

The menacing AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY signs had me on edge, but after we asked for a license application at reception, they let us through to the governor's office as if it was nothing.

And they gave us our license.

That was too easy. There's gotta be a catch.

"You look like you can't believe it. But don't worry; I trust my eye. You're not like all the other greedy mercenaries."

The office was full of shiny gold coffins. A girl sat haughtily in the middle of them.

Governor Sandberry—the most important person in Neoplus.

I was worried she'd be a huge guy, but in reality, she was a small girl, far from what the word "governor" brought to mind. Her (skimpy) outfit was fluttery and glittery, and she had rich-brown skin. Also, for some reason, she kept a bunny plushie sitting beside her.

She was unlike most of the people I knew.

I couldn't even tell her species.

"What? Is there something on my face?"

"Huh? No, nothing…"

"Please don't mind her, Governor. Terakomari is simply admiring your benevolence with gratitude."

"Geh," I uttered.

That was Spica La Gemini, if you could believe it. She wasn't yelling like a drunkard now—she was as calm as the moon.

She was as graceful as when she had adopted the persona of the Pope of the Holy City of Lehysia. Yes. It was all an act. An uncanny act.

She'd said, "Gotta keep our identities hidden when meeting the bigwigs!" but I felt like it was pointless, considering she kept her outer appearance the same.

"Okay. Eh, I guess it doesn't feel bad to be thanked."

Governor Sandberry opened the drawer next to her chair and took out a scroll that said MINING LICENSE.

"Thank you," Spica said as she received it. "We're lucky to have come across such a reasonable person. I should have expected it, coming from someone holding together the most dangerous place in the world."

"Are you being sarcastic? That's funny." The governor smiled sadistically. "I'll add you to the miner registry. You can go and explore Star Cave as much as you like. Just watch out for the Varmints, yeah?"

"The Varmints? I heard about monsters appearing in Star Cave."

"I guess you could call them that. They attack people at random. You've gotta run the moment you sense danger. I'm talking to you, little vampire. You look especially weak."

I jumped upon being pointed at.

Reflexively, I put on my cocky act.

"W-weak?! Ha! I've skewered a billion people with my pinkie finger alone! I'm the strongest vampire there is!"

"*Pfft.* Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

The governor burst into laughter.

Maybe a billion was too much. That's one damn long finger.

"Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha… Please don't make me laugh! But hey, I like me some cocky girls."

"Huh…?"

"I love stomping on them, making them kneel, rubbing in reality. Making them realize they are nothing, then putting them in my coffins for my collection."

"Lingzi, mind if I hide behind you?"

"I—I won't let you lay a finger on Komari!"

Lingzi stepped before me with her arms spread.

She's so earnest and cute. It felt like getting a look of what Sakuna had lost.

…Hmm? Wasn't Sakuna the neat and pure type just like Lingzi?

Ugh, my head…

Eh, whatever.

Anyhow, it didn't feel like Governor Sandberry was just a sadistic girl.

The important thing to note here was she'd realized I was weaker

than a snail.

It was only a matter of time before she saw through Spica's creepy act, too.

"Back on topic," the governor said. "Now you can join the gold rush. Just remember to pay your taxes, 'kay?"

"Of course, I would never avoid paying my taxes. I swear to God," said Spica.

"Oh, and one more warning…"

She took another paper from the drawer and showed it to us.

On it was a strange diagram, resembling a shiny starlike sphere.

Hmm? Haven't I seen this before?

"We're looking for this bomb. It was unexploded in a war far in the past, and there's a chance it might be buried in Star Cave. If you find it, leave it right where it is and tell me."

That's the Dark Core, isn't it?

What's the governor scheming?

"Understood." Spica nodded. "We wouldn't want it to explode. We shall notify you promptly if we come across it."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Hmm…"

The governor and Spica stared at each other.

A clash beyond my comprehension took place before my eyes.

Finally, the brown-skinned girl crossed her legs and said, "Thanks. Good luck out there! Neoplus's development depends on you miners staying alive and sane."

We got our license and left the government office.

Now we could enter Star Cave, where Star Citadel was supposedly hiding.

I'm getting nervous.

Tremolo was near the top of the list of super murderers I knew.

I really hope I get out of this alive… Ahhh, I need to go to the bathroom.

"She was one peculiar lady—Governor Sandberry," Spica said,

holding a crimson lollipop. “She looked as if she was hiding something. She acts like a good politician, but I feel like she’s got something big under wraps.”

“I agree. She said she wanted to trap me in a coffin, for starters.”

“That is true…but that big thing was a Dark Core, wasn’t it, Spica?” Lingzi asked timidly.

“Yes.” Spica put on a wicked smile. “There’s a possibility she might be involved in Star Citadel’s activities. I don’t know if she’s a member or just being used, but either way, she’s making the mercenaries look for the Dark Core while they’re mining. This also means Star Citadel hasn’t gotten their hands on it yet.”

“Really…? Then shouldn’t we be investigating her more?” I asked.

“I’ll tell Amatsu and Tryphon.”

I couldn’t imagine that lady was a killer like Tremolo, but I did tend to make surface-level judgments. I’d better try to develop a more observing eye like Spica’s.

“Or we might have to take some measures. If she’s a member of Star Citadel, then the enemy already knows about our plans to infiltrate Neoplus.”

“Not that it matters, but how long are you gonna keep up that act?”

“Measures! We gotta watch out for her! Maybe we should’ve killed her right then and there!”

Spica got loud all of a sudden.

“Um,” Lingzi said hesitatingly. “Spica, do you also have a split personality?”

“No way! I’m not gross like Fuyao!”

Fuyao’s ears twitched. The foxgirl had been a silent statue the whole time. Spica ignored her reaction and looked up at the blue sky.

“Mine is only an act. An act that was born from admiration… It was hard avoiding being caught back when I was the Pope.”

“…Your Highness, could you quit the gross posturing?”

“Fuyao, that’s rude! How dare you call people gross! I adopted a quiet personality to trick people…but also because I *wanted* to be a composed person like Julius VI. She was serene, the opposite of

me."

"Are you okay in the head?"

"There's nothing not okay with what I'm saying. Everyone wishes to be somebody else. Though you're the only one I know of who's taken it to the point of Core Implosion."

I had no idea what they were talking about. I just wanted to scream.

And pee.

I found a public toilet and pointed to it.

"…Mind if I use the restroom?"

"So my conversation bored you! Come back within five seconds, or I'll put you in a collar!"

"What the—?! Give me five minutes, at least!"

Spica cackled.

I ran to the toilet.



"They say Star Cave's crawling with Varmints. Can't mine like this."

"Have you heard they've been showing up outside the hole now?"

"They attacked someone?"

"Isn't there any way to exterminate them?"

These are some thin walls.

I could hear people chatting from the other side of the restroom building, from the men's room.

Their utterances caught my attention. Besides some stuff I couldn't quite understand, they kept mentioning scary things, like people being attacked and the need to do some extermination.

The Varmints.

Tryphon and Governor Sandberry mentioned them already, but do they really exist? Ferocious beasts like shadows? Are they sure they didn't just see a black cat or something?

"Oh well."

No use thinking about it.

I flushed the toilet and left the stall.

It was time to go to Star Cave. I had to take some deep breaths to prepare myself mentally…but I froze at what I found next.

In front of me stood three men.

Hmm? Men…? But…

"H-hey! This is the girls' restroom!"

"Yeah, and I'm a woman."

"Ah…"

Was that rude of me?

I'd thought she was a man because of her burly muscles, but she had a high-pitched voice and wore women's clothing. She was a Warblade.

So then that means the other two are women, too.

The person on the right had a beard, and the one on the left was shirtless.

"Wait, but what about the other two?!"

"What, you sayin' men can't go into the women's room?!"

"Gweh!"

The woman grabbed me by the collar.

My brain couldn't keep up with what was going on.

Am I getting mugged? Spica took all my money… Then the Warblade woman said something I could not have seen coming.

"You're Terakomari Gandesblood, right?"

"…"

My survival instincts rang their alarm bells.

It didn't seem like the trio were here to hand me the handkerchief I'd dropped. I had a feeling they would beat me to a pulp if I admitted I was Terakomari.

"Wh-who's that Tera-what's-her-name…?"

"There's a bounty on your head. Look."

She showed me a piece of paper.

On it was an (eerily accurate) drawing of my face as well as the following message: ***WANTED-1 million nuko to whoever kills these two.***

I felt like the world was spinning.

It wasn't just me. The poster said *these two*. The other drawing was also of a familiar face. A blond girl wearing a strange hat—Spica. The artist really deserved a round of applause for the accuracy of their portraits.

I decided to play dumb.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha… Looks like a scary duo. What'd they do?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. What matters is that I get a million nuko if I kill them."

"What's a nuko?"

"Nuko, what else? You're Terakomari Gandesblood, aren't you? And that girl with the weird outfit you were with is this Spica La Gemini, isn't she?"

"N-no! I'm Gigakomari!"

Blam!

Something blew up beside me.

One of the men (the bearded one) broke the wall to the toilet with his bare hand.

He's gotta be at least as strong as Sakuna…

The woman looked at me like a hungry scorpion.

"I don't like stupid lies. I'll just kill you and send your body to the client."

"W-w-wait! I've done nothing to have a bounty on my head! Who even put it on me?!"

"Who cares? Guys."

""Yes, ma'am!""

The men took out some weapons that looked like saws.

A slash from one of those would definitely kill me.

But why?! Why are they trying to kill me all of a sudden?! I've had assassins sent after me before, but there was a bit more context for those! As I stood there, frozen and despairing…

"Die."

…they brought their saws to my neck.

The moment I thought I was dead…

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"Eh?"

…the (shirtless) man collapsed.

He blacked out immediately, his expression frozen in confusion. He fell to the filthy floor without getting the chance to scream. The other man (the bearded one) turned around to see what happened, but by that time, it was already late. My rescuer struck his thick neck with the back of her sword.

"Gweh!"

The (bearded) man spun in the air.

The woman let go of me and turned around in shock.

Behind her stood…

"Wh-who the hell are you?!"

"I should be asking you that. I thought you were late, and you're here playing around with these guys?"

The first sentence was aimed at the woman, and the second one at me.

Her ears twitched, and her fluffy tail waved.

Fuyao looked down at me in exasperation, unsheathed katana in hand.

The woman produced a dagger out of nowhere, like a magic trick.

"Ha! Terakomari's friend? You wasted your chance to leave safely! Just so you know, we're Black Scorpion, the wood-rank mercenary team! You go home and eat some fried tof—"

Fuyao smacked the woman in the nose with the hilt of her katana.

Blood spurted out of her nose as she slammed into the wall so hard, I was sure the impact would kill her. She spasmed a little before losing consciousness, and she showed no sign of coming back up.

The three scoundrels had fallen in the blink of an eye.

I fell limply on my behind.

I survived.

Thanks to this foxgirl…

I had to thank her, but I couldn't speak from the trauma of almost getting killed.

Then, as I saw Fuyao approach the Black Scorpion members with

sword in hand, I was shocked, like I'd been slapped on the head with jelly.

"W-wait! Don't kill them!"

I tried grabbing her waist, but instead, I wound up snatching her giant tail.

My whole body was enveloped in sweet fluffiness.

"Kon?!" Fuyao let out a peculiar shriek.

I had to ignore it.

"I know they're bad, but you can't kill them! They have to be interrogated. It's better if we take them to the police! Please put away your sword!"

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha…? You're wrong!"




©rlichu

"Uwah?!"

Flumf! Her tail swung hard, and I lost my grip on it.

Fuyao turned around, fuming.

It's over. I'm dead.

Her next words took me by surprise.

"…I'm not going to kill them. They're small fries, not ready to die. Unworthy of the Null Night Blade."

"Ready to…? Aren't you a terrorist? Don't you kill anyone in your path?"

Fuyao turned back around grumpily.

She ignored my plea and walked up to Black Scorpion. Without reserve or consideration, she began rummaging through their clothes, grabbing their wallets and guild cards.

"Hmph." She snorted while playing with the cards in her hand. "They really were mercenaries. All of them Warblades. Eugena Scorpin, Bearde Hedge, and Shirless Hedge. So the men were brothers."

She just wanted to check who they were?

I jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"S-sorry. I was sure you were going to kill them."

"…I've never killed someone who didn't want to die."

"Huh?"

She sheathed her sword and crossed her arms.

"I have a code. Although I'm sure you wouldn't understand…"

"Komari, are you okay?! They didn't hurt you, did they?!"

"Yow! The hoodlums are already after us! No wonder Neoplus is so infamous!"

Lingzi and Spica ran over to us.

I finally snapped out of it.

Fuyao's comment was still on my mind, but there was something more alarming at hand. We had to find out why I'd almost gotten killed. Why were these assassins after me and Spica?

"I see, I see." With a grin on her face, Spica picked up the wanted poster from the floor. "So this is what it's all about! That's why those killers were tailing us!"

"You knew?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"They knew about us! There could only be one explanation for this—Star Citadel was expecting us to come to Neoplus!"

Huh? That doesn't sound good.

Our plan was to *sneak into Star Cave to catch Star Citadel by surprise*.

It was ruined from the very outset.

"Your Highness, there's more," Fuyao murmured aggressively.

"Oh. Looks like there's no reason to hide anymore, huh?"

"More? No way." I turned fearfully toward the entrance.

Multiple men were standing near the entrance. In their hands were…guns? They looked lot more primitive than the kind Prohellya used, though.

"Die."

They all fired at once.

A hail of bullets ravaged the floor.

"Waaaah?!"

The storm of shots thundered all over the ladies' restroom, turning it into Swiss cheese. I took cover without shame. The windows shattered. Passersby outside screamed and ran. *What the heck? Don't they have a shred of humanity?*

"Your Highness! The outside is crawling with enemies!" Fuyao yelled while repelling the bullets with her Null Night Blade.

"Komari, are you okay?!" Lingzi shrieked as she unfolded her iron fan and flicked away the bullets flying toward me. I couldn't even scream anymore.

Spica produced a strange sphere from her pocket and threw it.

"Retreat! This place is too cramped!"

Fuyao and Lingzi realized what she meant.

Lingzi hugged me all of a sudden, and my vision turned white. Spica had hurled a smoke bomb. The next thing I knew, I was already out of the window. Lingzi had carried me away.

Spica and Fuyao nimbly jumped out of the window, too.

"Bitches!" "You're not getting away!" the assassins screamed from the restroom.

I held on to Lingzi as I pulled myself up.

"Wh-what's going on?! How can someone be so savage?!"

A stray cat in the alleyway fled, startled. The passersby stared at us suspiciously.

"Isn't it obvious?!" Spica smiled gleefully. "Some hired guns are here to kill us! They only care about money! Simpletons blinded by greed! Now that's what you call a gold rush! There's nothing more wretched!"

"What are you smiling for?!"

"She's right. We're surrounded," Fuyao said in a low voice, holding up her Null Night Blade.

Just then a bunch of men appeared in the alleyway.

Lingzi let out an "Eep" in fright. Anyone would do the same when stared down by a bunch of greedy killers.

"What a grand reception! Who hired you?!" asked Spica.

"Heh-heh." A man with a tattoo on his face chuckled. "We just gotta kill you, and we're loaded! Your lives end here!"

The men charged with their swords. They targeted Spica first.

I almost ran to defend her. Spica was a wicked terrorist, but it wasn't fair for her to go out like that here.

"Spicaaa!"

But my concern was unnecessary.

Spica took a lollipop out of her pocket and put it in her mouth.

She clenched her hands into fists, lowered one hip, and glared directly at the killers. The moment they swung their weapons, she sprang upward with her fists forward.

A shock wave.

I thought the whole world had been smashed.

The men screamed as they were blown away. A powerful gust blew. All the windows on the buildings in the vicinity shattered, and the pavement was uprooted and ripped apart into a million pieces.

Lingzi and I stood there, frozen, our jaws on the ground.

That was not magic. Nor Core Implosion.

It was purely the power of her punch. Not even a gorilla could have done that.

"Her Highness's weapon is her fists."

Tryphon had shown up next to us out of nowhere.

When did you get here?! The Sapphire terrorist ignored my

reaction as he gazed at Spica like a father looking at his pride and joy.

"Her magic and Core Implosion are out of this world, but what's most impressive is her arm and grip strength. Smashing anything in her way with brute force—that's how Spica La Gemini's fights."

What the heck? You can't just punch through literally everything*!*

Spica cackled as she looked at the flustered killers.

"They just keep coming, huh?! Just how greedy are you all?!"

"Wha…?"

It wasn't over yet. More and more people emerged from the shadows.

Shoot, there's too many of them…

"Terakomari! You take care of that side! I'll get rid of these guys."

"Huh…? What side?"

I turned around automatically.

Oooh, I'm dead.

A bunch of killers were rushing from the other side.

"DIIIE!!"

"WAAAH!!"

"Watch out, Komari!"

An iron fan slammed into one man's face. He collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

Lingzi stood valiantly before me.

"Lingzi?! You can fight?!"

"Y-yeah, I've been trained since I was little…!"

Right, she was a commander in the Enchanted Lands.

I had no time to waste being impressed, though.

Assassins jumped at us from every which way.

Lingzi quickly swung her iron fan. One of the assailants got through her defenses and charged at me with sword in hand…but Fuyao knocked him out with the back of her blade.

"Sly bunch. Give up already."

Tryphon activated his Core Implosion.

His needles pierced the attackers in the legs, and their screams echoed in the back alley. Yet still, more men kept coming.

Intermittenly, I could hear Spica punching people behind me. My

brain was a mess. *Why must people wage war?* The battle was so fierce, it was making me philosophical.

The enemy would win through sheer force of numbers at this rate.

If only we had a trump card…

"Oh, I get it now! It was the governor who put the bounty on us!" Spica yelled.

She was smiling while strangling a guy.

"What?! She's with Star Citadel?!"

"Not sure yet, but what's certain is that hit men will keep coming for us from all over Neoplus if we don't do something! Annoying, right?"

"'Annoying' is putting it lightly!! I'm crapping my pants in fear!!"

"The problem is they're taking us lightly! It'll all be over once we show 'em our power! Terakomari! Go wild! Burn it all!"

"Huh? Uh…"

Spica swung her bloody right arm.

A few drops of blood flew…all the way into my mouth.

"Komari!" Lingzi yelped, but it was over already.

The story took a hard turn the moment I drank blood.

My heart beat faster. I felt exalted.

Mana that shouldn't exist in the Netherworld gushed out of me.

A crimson light enveloped the world.

☆

The hit men thought they had an easy job.

The government sent the hit list to the shady parts of Neoplus. A dream job—just kill two girls and get rich.

But then they met them.

The girls were monsters.

Spica La Gemini's brute strength was abnormal; she sent the largest mercenaries flying with a punch. Not even moon ranks could

beat her.

As for the other… Terakomari Gandesblood…

"Ahhh…"

The hit men looked up at the sky in despair.

The vampire floated in the air, wrapped in deep-crimson malice.

She was no Immortal, yet she was floating. What sort of strange trick was she pulling? Moreover, crimson energy glowed and crackled all around her. Simply getting near her made one's flesh burn. Her hostile aura was just that strong.

They couldn't make any sense of it.

The only thing they knew was the hunter had become the hunted.

"No way… She's an esper?!"

"R-retreat! These wenches are worse than Varmints!"

They had no idea who they were going up against. This monstrous girl could not be felled by human hands.

The killers scurried away like cockroaches.

However, the monster did not let them go.

"Stop."

She swept her finger down.

The next moment, crimson lightning ravaged the world. The hit men were blown back, screaming.

The buildings in the vicinity crumbled, and the passersby escaped as they shrieked.

But the girl's lightning only hit hostile mercenaries. The attackers threw themselves to the ground as they tried to run for their lives. *She's not human…!*

"Terakomari! The governor's the root of all this! She's right over there!" yelled the twin-tailed vampire gleefully.

Terakomari's animosity switched targets.

Her eyes were locked onto the symbol of Neoplus: the government office. She slowly raised her arm. The crimson lightning congregated in her small fingertips.

Impossible! Is she…?!

The hit men who were still alive felt their hair stand on end.

Terakomari muttered the exact words they feared:

"Repent."

They heard the world break.

A gigantic beam fired from her fingertips at the government office.

☆

"Pizza! ♪ Pizza! ♪ I love pizza! ♪ Topped with cheese and onions and bacon! ♪"

Around that time, Count Sandberry, aka Nefty Strawberry, was in her office eating pizza.

It was lunchtime. She thought there was nothing better than pizza after a morning of annoying work. She savored the mouthwatering melted cheese in a state of pure bliss.

Coffin Bearer Nefty Strawberry.

The Princess of the Desert was a member of Star Citadel. She was in charge of protecting the group's leader.

That said, her current main focus was overseeing the mining city of Neoplus as its governor.

Her goals were to gather mercenaries—using the Mandala minerals as bait—and make them search for the Dark Core, and to amass funds for Star Citadel through the mining tax.

I'm doing a pretty good job, if I say so myself, Nefty thought.

The hardest part had been attaining the position of governor. She'd needed to pass the strenuous civil servant exam, climb the steepest social ladder, and finally get assigned to the mining city. Nefty's hard work had allowed Star Citadel to build a strong foundation.

Tremolo and Nerzanpi should be more grateful for her.

Who did they think made it possible to be terrorists without worrying about their finances?

"Star Citadel would be over without me. *Nom-nom.*"

Tremolo was particularly difficult to deal with.

She was planning to set up a trap in Star Cave to ambush Spica and Terakomari, but why take such a slow approach?

So Nefty had put a bounty on their heads and sent hit men out for them.

They must be under fire from the money-grubbers by now.

She didn't think the gunmen would actually kill them, but it would be more than enough if they took an arm or two from them.

"All quiet in Neoplus. Everything is going according to plan."

Now the only issue was finding the Dark Core.

The mercenaries were less useful than she'd hoped. Tremolo said she would help, but Nefty had already been looking for years and had no results. No way someone who was new to this could accomplish anything.

Anyway, let's just enjoy the pizza for now.

Nom-nom. Gulp.

"Hmm?"

Light shone outside the window.

Nefty turned around while reaching for her next slice.

It wasn't light, exactly—it was like the window had been dyed with blood.

The red color signified a mana reaction.

What's going on? The moment she cocked her head, raising the slice to her mouth, the window broke. The wall came down. A gust that would send a sumo wrestler flying blew.

Da-da-da-da-da-da!! Her brain shook.

The floor below her trembled, the pizza slid out of her hand, and an avalanche of debris crashed down on her.

"NWAAAAH?!"

Nefty fell off her chair and rolled around.

The impact was so sudden, she could do nothing to defend herself. Crimson lightning enveloped the office, gouging everything inside it. *Oh no. This is bad. I'm gonna die. I gotta get up.*

"Pwagh?!"

Rubble hit the back of her head.

Her vision went blurry and red.

No. No, this can't be…

Plop.

Nefty lost consciousness without a clue as to what was going on.

☆

When I came to, the city was in shambles.

I was surrounded by heaps of unconscious mercenaries.

The people looked at me in fear.

I see, I see.

I understood everything, as I had used my Core Implosion multiple times before already.

That had happened. The usual ordeal.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Well done, Terakomari! Now that's the slaughter commander for you!"

Spica laughed heartily, slapping my back.

I wanted to slip away from reality. *I don't think anybody's dead. I kinda remember adjusting for that.* But there were way too many wrecked buildings for my liking. *If I'm going to be made responsible for all this, I might have no choice but to get on a boat and become a tuna fisherwoman.*

"AAAH?! What do I do?! I can't pay for repairs!"

"Who cares! Let's go to the government office!"

"Who cares about *that*! Uh, w-wah, don't pull me!"

Spica pulled me by the hand across the alleyway.

Alarms rang in the distance. The police had to be on the move.

The people on the streets screamed and ran like they had come across a demon.

This is worse than any damage the wanted poster could've done!

"Lingzi…am I gonna get arrested…?"

"I-it's okay! I'll prove your innocence…!"

She gallantly cheered me up while running next to us.

"That's impossible," Fuyao said from the opposite side of me. *Damn it, the terrorist's right!*

"Don't worry! The world's gonna turn on its head! Look—the government office!" Spica said.

We arrived, and my eyeballs jumped out of their sockets.

The majestic mansion we'd just visited was in ruins.

The ceiling was gone. The interior was exposed. The surroundings were covered in rubble, and the civil servants were running around in a panic.

"Spica…? Did I do this…?"

"Yup! But you're not getting charged for any crimes."

Spica walked forward, cheerily licking her lollipop.

Beyond the rubble was a space with the remains of expensive-looking furniture. Probably Governor Sandberry's office.

A chair stood in the middle of the devastation. The gaudy chair where that brown-skinned girl had sat. Somehow, it had escaped destruction.

"Heigh-ho." Spica sat on it.

"Hey! What're you doing, Spi—?"

"I'm the governor now!"

"Wha…?"

I thought there was something wrong with my hearing, but nope.

Spica smiled from ear to ear and declared:

"I said! I'm taking over as governor of Neoplus Prefecture in Count Sandberry's stead! This whooole city is mine now! And thus, I absolve you of your crimes!"

"""" ……""""

Lingzi, Fuyao, and I turned to stone.

"Wonderful!" Tryphon showed up out of nowhere and clapped.

A few hours after arriving in Neoplus…we had somehow taken control of the city.

☆

"…Wha—?!"

Nefty Strawberry woke up.

She felt as though she'd had a nightmare. A dream where a giant tornado came in and tossed her into the sky. It felt too real. She was still dizzy, and the back of her head hurt.

She tried to rise to get some water and calm down.

"H-huh?"

But she couldn't move her body.

Her hands and feet were bound by rope. No matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't free herself. The ropes were made of Mandala minerals, a substance beyond her strength.

What was going on?

Not to mention, she was on the cold floor.

Her mind couldn't process the situation. She had met Terakomari and Spica, then eaten pizza for lunch, then crimson mana had covered her eyes, and then…

"…Star Citadel's plans came tumbling down! Happily ever after!"

"…?!"

A young, cheery voice came from overhead.

Nefty jerked her head up.

The office was in shambles, and at the center of it stood a chair—the same one she used every day—now occupied by a pigtailed vampire.

Spica La Gemini.

She crossed her legs and licked a crimson lollipop, looking down on Nefty as though she were garbage.

"Wh-what happened?! This is my office, but…"

"*Your* office? Ha! I think you mean *my* office!"

Nefty put her brain on nitro.

The crimson light that broke the world. Spica on her chair. Beside her, Lingzi Ailan, Fuyao Meteorite, Tryphon Cross…and Terakomari Gandesblood, who was cowering with an apologetic look on her face.

She understood it all now.

That light had been the glow of Terakomari's magic. This motley crew had captured her.

Disgrace. Utmost humiliation.

But why had they targeted the governor's office? Did they know she was with Star Citadel? And what was that about this being *Spica's* office now? She still had many questions—but Nefty had to bluff. Her coffins weren't near her. She couldn't kill them.

"H-ha… You did all this? You think you'll get away with it?"

"Yes! Because you're an evil terrorist!"

"Huh? Coups are a big crime, you know. What do you think'll happen once the garrison finds you? It'll be worse than getting skinned ali— BWOOF?!"

A boot came down on her head. It hurt.

"Ah-ha-ha!" the cocky vampire cackled. "I'm the governor now! My word is law!"

"Wha…?! I-I'm the governor! Stop with this crap, or I'll throw you in the—"

"Fuyao! Show her your power!"

"Sheesh…"

Next to Spica, the eyes of the foxgirl glowed red.

Bomf!! Smoke covered the surroundings.

From beyond appeared a brown-skinned girl in desert garb. Before Nefty Strawberry's eyes was the same thing she saw every morning in the mirror, despite there being no mirror. Then the other her even started speaking in her voice.

"I'm Count Sandberry! The governor of Neoplus!"

"Wha… WHAAAAT?!" Nefty screamed while getting stepped on.

Her bluff broke. She now understood Spica and Terakomari's wicked plot.

"Fuyao's Core Implosion is called Inari-Avatar Reflection, and it allows her to copy people's appearances. Inverse Moon will be taking your title and authority!"

"Y-you… You can't…!"

"And you're going to prison! Don't worry; we won't kill you…yet! We need to make you spill the beans on Yusei!"

"I don't know any Yusei! I'm just an honest governor!"

“We’ll see if you say the same after a torture session.” She smiled. It was the smile of the devil. The devil poked Nefty’s forehead with her toes as she continued, “Thank you for developing Neoplus for me! This whooooooooooole city is mine now! You’re dismissed! ♪”

“……”

Nefty’s life flashed before her eyes.

She’d studied hard every day until late at night for the civil servant exam. She’d jumped with joy when her name had appeared on the board announcing the successful applicants. She’d walked around handing out snacks to her colleagues and bosses to make connections. She’d worked herself to the bone to make Neoplus flourish. She’d enjoyed her after-work pizza in the office.

She reached her mental limits.

“AAAAAAAAH!! SPICA LA GEMINIIIIIIIIIIIII!! I WILL KILL YOUUUUUUUUUU!!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!! There’s no sweeter melody than the resentment of a loser!! Tryphon, get this screamer out of my sight!!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tryphon dragged Nefty out of the office.

They were demons. They’d stolen a whole lifetime’s worth of effort just like that, and without a hint of regret.

Not to mention, Nefty’s plan to help Tremolo had wound up making her comrade’s job harder.

What would happen to Star Citadel now?

Nefty cursed her carelessness as she was thrown into a cell.

※

Later, the Neoplus government issued an official announcement as followed:

- The mining tax is repealed.
- The mining restrictions are repealed.

- Any and all taxes and restrictions are repealed.

Needless to say, the citizens were overjoyed.

On the other hand, the governor announced she was pardoning the people who had wrecked the government office, but this was met with little in the way of opposition.

Additionally, she rescinded the warrant against Spica and Terakomari, ending the possibility of attacks from hit men.

And so began the reign of Inverse Moon, using (a fake) Governor Sandberry as their puppet.

Spica La Gemini's haphazard plan was going smoothly.

Now they just had to kill Yusei, Tremolo, *et al.*



A few days after Spica took over Neoplus.

Everyone in town praised Governor Sandberry's new policies.

What they didn't know—the governor had been thrown in jail and replaced by a loony vampire.

"Ridiculous" didn't even begin to cover it.

I couldn't exactly wash my hands of it, though, as I'd blown up the government office myself, but taking advantage of it to usurp the state was all Spica. And Fuyao's heinous power. She turned into the governor and made everything go our way.

"Mmm… Nope!"

Spica stretched as she sat down in the governor's chair in the middle of her wrecked office.

Lingzi cordially set a cup of black tea on the desk. Neoplus's ruler gulped it all down without a word of thanks, then smiled.

"There is not a single document regarding Star Citadel in this building. I was sure there would be something… But Terakomari did blow up the place! As punishment, you will be my dog from now on!"

"Eat my shorts."

"That's a wrench in our plans! We've got no choice but to make Governor Sandberry spill the beans. Tryphon, how's it going?"

"Not promising." Tryphon furrowed his brow as he sipped his tea. "I am torturing her with needles, but she shows no overt reaction.

Circumstantial evidence indicates she is clearly Star Citadel's Nefty Strawberry, but she won't own up to anything…"

By the way, Tremolo was the one who had given them Nefty's name. That bard sure was loose-lipped.

"And I thought she was just some dumb girl."

"I'll do everything to make her squeal, but it might take some time."

"Okay! Do anything that's necessary. Just get something out of her!"

We still had no idea where Yusei was. That character was as elusive as a cloud. What were they even like? Well, probably a crazy killer, that was for sure.

"Your Highness, what will we do next?" Fuyao asked.

Spica jumped out of her chair.

"You really gotta ask?! Smash through the front door!"

"Front door? Where…?"

Her blue eyes glowed like stars.

"Into the jaws of the beast! Star Cave!"

☆

Star Cave was a hole in the center of Neoplus.

It hadn't been more than eight years since they started excavation, but thanks to the restless efforts of the numerous mercenaries, the mining pit was now so big that people called it an underground dungeon. Lately, the city had been warning against reckless expansion for fear of subsidence.

We stood at the entrance of the dungeon.

I screamed and kicked and thrashed, protesting about not wanting to go, but then Spica said she would kill me, and I realized my hissy fit was meaningless. I had no choice but to help Inverse Moon. *I mean, I'm already a terrorist, since I wrecked the government office…*

"The energy here is fiery… It reminds me of the Heavenly Ball," Lingzi muttered, impressed.

A bunch of mercenaries assembled by the entrance, and lines of stalls cried for their attention. It did feel like a festival. Spica's wanton policies had created a new mining boom.

"…Hmm?"

I saw Fuyao standing still in front of a stall.

What is she looking at? …Inari sushi?

"What? You want some?" I asked.

"……No," said Fuyao.

"But you like fried tofu. I'm sure you've gotta like inari sushi, too."

"Don't you dare treat inari sushi and fried tofu like they're the same, or I'll kill you."

I freaked out.

I was aware I wasn't the best talker, so I might've rubbed her the wrong way, but this foxgirl was unbelievable to reply with that.

I could not possibly be friends with her. My instincts screamed at me to stay away.

Look away and step aside.

"Wow! It's overflowing with people! And they're all just here for the money! Humankind is doomed!" Spica said.

"Stop yelling those things! You're making the scary guys glare at us!" I shouted.

"Glare right back at them! Let's go! Exploring time!"

I sighed.

"Don't tell me we're really diving into full-fledged investigation now. I'm not mentally prepared."

"It'd be hilariously crazy if we just went on a stroll and ended up killing Yusei and Tremolo on the way, but we're doing a survey first. A preliminary investigation while Tryphon is getting intel on his side. I wanna see with my own eyes what Star Cave and the Varmints are like, and look around to see if a Dark Core could really be in here."

Spica walked off without a care in the world.

She went to reception and yelled, "Four children, please!!"

This ain't no theme park! You're making the receptionist give us weird looks!

"…You do have a license, but will you really be all right in there?" asked the guy at reception.

"Don't worry! Terakomari here looks super weak, but she's the strongest vampire ever! She's skewered a billion people at once with her pinkie finger!" Spica said.

"Please stop. Seriously, you're embarrassing me," I said.

"She's also plotting to take over the world and exterminate humanity!"

"Are you the CEO of Six Nations News or what?!"

"…That sounds very ambitious, but the problem is the mine is a bit tied up right now." The guy frowned, ignoring Spica's nonsense.

"What happened?"

"Varmints."

Lingzi tugged on my sleeve.

It was then that I noticed an odd crowd in the plaza. Everyone looked troubled. A woman was clinging to some mercenaries, pleading with immense anguish.

"…What's going on?"

"The Varmints have been popping up outside Star Cave lately, and one just went on a rampage in the plaza. A few mercenaries ended up wounded, and the Varmint got away. It took a kid with it, too."

"Wha…?!"

"That woman must be the kid's mother. She's been asking all the mercenaries to go save her child, but…"

None of them seemed interested. Though they appeared to pity her, they acted as if it wasn't their problem.

"Unfortunately, no one comes out unscathed from Varmint encounters. Nobody wants to risk their life by breaking some bones to save the kid."

"What the…?"

I was shocked to hear about the monster attack, but I was more speechless at the fact none of the adults cared about saving a child.

"Those mercenaries…" Fuyao stared at the plaza emotionlessly. "Are they gonna leave the kid to die? They could be alive out there."

"Putting it bluntly, yeah. But they have a job to do. Wouldn't

make much business sense to do unpaid work."

"…"

"Anyway, I can't recommend you go into Star Cave with the risk of Varmints so high right now. Even the mercenaries are on edge. A perfect day for mining ruined. They'll be going home soo— Hey, wait!"

I stopped listening to the guy in the middle of his spiel and walked over to the crowd.

The mercenaries gave me weird looks, but I ignored them.

I went over to the begging woman and clenched my hands, looking at her.

"What does your child look like…?"

"Huh…?"

She stared at me like she was dreaming.

I knew. Nobody in the Netherworld knew the Seven Crimson Lords. In this world, Terakomari Gandesblood was nothing but a one-in-a-billion knockout beauty.

"Tell me. I'm going into Star Cave."

"No… What are you saying? You're also just a kid…"

"That I may be! But I'm also a commander and a mercenary."

I took my guild card out of my pocket.

The woman gasped upon seeing it.

"You'll really do it…?"

"Yes."

I had no idea if I could actually save them, but I had to try.

"Look at that. I can't believe it."

Someone whistled mockingly.

The mercenaries nearby pointed at me and laughed.

"She's crazy." "She's playing the hero?" "That kid's dead meat."

This had already started to dawn on me, but there was something bleak about this city. You could tell the hearts of the people were rotten. Had they wound up like this after being blinded by money, or were they like this from the beginning?

Their spitefulness nearly broke my spirit.

"Hey. Getting us more work?" Fuyao came up to me, giving me an annoyed look. "Let's go already. We've got no time to lose."

"Ah, yeah."

She walked over to Star Cave, her tail swaying.

Hmm. Could it be she's actually a nice girl…?

But she was an evil terrorist who'd hurt Karla and had done so much wrong during the Vampire Riots… *I don't understand. What's with Inverse Moon?*

"Komari, Spica's already inside." Lingzi ran up to me. "She was fuming, saying it could be Star Citadel's work. I think she might have a strong sense of justice."

Did she, really? I didn't understand her, either.

Fuyao and Tryphon sure have it rough, being dragged along by her… No, wait. What am I doing, feeling for these terrorists? I must be tired.

"…Hee-hee, you're so upright, Komari."

"What does that mean?"

"Just like when you saved me, you're always thinking of helping people. That's why I feel encouraged when I'm with you."

"You overestimate me. Anyway, we gotta rescue that kid quickly."

"Yes. I'll give it my all, too."

Lingzi and I ran after Spica and Fuyao.

We had to get through Star Cave at any cost.

Between Star Citadel, Meihua, the Varmints, and the kid, there were too many alarming factors in play, but I couldn't let my anxiety get the best of me.

☆

A purple world lay beyond the hole.

The air chilled the spine, and the echoes of overlapping footsteps and animal cries pierced the ear.

The path through the cave was wider than I expected; we could walk side by side with room to spare. This part of the road was well maintained, being at the entrance.

I imagined it would be jam-packed with mercenaries on a normal day, but I couldn't see any at the moment due to the Varmint attacks.

"…It's brighter in here than I thought."

"That's thanks to the light of the Mandala minerals. So pretty…" Lingzi sighed.

The inside of Star Cave was aglow in a glossy purple. It was the luminescence of the Mandala minerals buried in the walls.

No need for a torch, huh?

"Extracting the minerals from this zone is forbidden, to maintain a source of light. These ones are low purity anyway, so the mercenaries would rather go for something bigger."

The girl wearing a lab coat, Lonne Cornelius, explained this to us while staring at our map of Star Cave.

She had sneaked into the mine ahead of us to investigate.

"By the way, the glow comes from mana. The people of the Netherworld are wasting this treasure because they don't know how to use magic."

"Oh, the woes of ignorance. And, Cornelius, what's with the ice pick?" asked Spica.

"Hmm? Well, I was thinking of mining some Mandala minerals."

"Didn't you just say you can't mine here?"

Clang!! Clang!!

Cornelius wore an eerie smile as she dug without concern.

"Inverse Moon owns Neoplus now. There's no reason for us to abide by the rules. Hey, I got one! Look at this!"

Will she be okay? What if the mercenaries beat her up later?

"Hee-hee… This magnificent glow! If I use this right, I could start a whole new line of research! Just imagine—glowing shiitake."

"Excuse me?! There's a criminal here mining where she shouldn't be!!" said Spica.

"Whoooa?! Don't tell on me, Your Highness!!"

Spica cackled.

"Stop playing." Fuyao glared at Cornelius. "Tell us about the Varmints."

"Awww…"

I imagined how hard the girl wearing a lab coat must've had it on a daily basis with Inverse Moon. It was a glimpse into its power dynamics.

"Okay." Cornelius flipped through her notebook's pages with discontent. "I saw the attack at the plaza. A black beast appeared out of nowhere and started attacking person after person. The mercenaries fought back, but it was too fast. They couldn't deal with it, and it grabbed a kid and ran into Star Cave. It was literally wild."

"How are Varmints different from regular animals?"

"Good question, Terakomari." Her eyes twinkled behind her glasses. "That thing cannot possibly be a regular animal; you'll understand once you see it. It's black like it's made from ink, and it can freely change its shape."

"I told you it was a black cat…"

"That wouldn't be fun. Its basic shape is that of an animal, but that's more of a magical phenomenon than a creature. It could be the result of someone's willpower. What we can say for certain is that Star Citadel has to be related."

I didn't care a lot about the logic behind the Varmints. The fact was monsters were attacking people, and it made my heart race.

"Is the kid all right…?"

"Who knows?! Maybe they're in the Varmint's stomach by now!" Spica said.

"Don't say that! We gotta find them quickly…"

"Maybe *you'll* end up in their tummy instead!"

"Ugh, you have a point… Do you think we can take it on…?" I asked Cornelius.

"Terakomarin, don't you remember your Core Implosion? Surely the Varmint can't hold a candle to your Blood Curse." Cornelius flashed an optimistic smile. "To tell the truth, I'm very interested in your Core Implosion. I'd love to take a look at it firsthand. We have records of the vampire, Warblade, Peace Spirit, and Immortal versions—now we just need the full Sapphire and beast-folk versions. There's a fox right there, so how about you sample her blood?"

"Huh? Wai—"

Cornelius pushed me in front of Fuyao.

The foxgirl glared daggers at me.

"Aw," I moaned.

"…"

"…"

It was too awkward. I felt like it would be rude to tell Fuyao I would never suck her blood, but asking her if I could would be depraved.

Lingzi couldn't stand by and say nothing; she poked my back.

"…If push comes to shove, suck mine?"

"Y-yeah! There we have it!"

"…Hmph." Fuyao swayed her tail and looked away.

Spica narrowed her eyes. "Fuyao, haven't you been a bit too quiet lately?"

"No."

"What's with the other girl?"

"My 'tail' personality? Nothing…" Fuyao looked up at the shiny ceiling and sighed. "…She's just sleeping. Really messes with my energy."

I observed the foxgirl curiously.

She looked confused. Scared. Her expression was oddly nuanced for the cold-blooded killer I knew.

☆

The inside of Star Cave wasn't a straight path.

There were tunnels going every which way. The place was a labyrinth any first-timer would get lost in. This was a consequence of mercenaries digging at random trying to find their own special spot, and they kept digging new tunnels to this day. Apparently, not even the local government had a full grasp of it.

The map showed only the main route; it was impossible to map out the countless branches the mercenaries had dug on a whim.

"Whoooa?! I can't believe it! It's full of pure Mandala minerals! Can we snatch some?! Yes, we can!"

Cornelius jumped up and down like a kid.

We arrived at an open space about an hour into exploring.

This had to be the forefront of the main route.

There were digging tools all over the place, and a few chairs and tables for resting.

The ceiling was tall enough to fit a giraffe from the Lapelico Kingdom, with space to spare.

We got to the bottom of the cave before we knew it.

What grabbed our attention the most was a purple wall of rock in front of us.

The pure (in Cornelius's words) Mandala minerals glowed blindingly bright.

Those are some pretty rocks. I get why they sell for so much.

I started wanting some for my own. A choker or a pendant made of them would look nice on Vill— *No, stay on task.*

"Cornelius! Do you know where the kid is?!"

"What are you saying, Terakomarin? That doesn't matter right now! Let's snatch all the minerals while the miners aren't around!"

What the…? I knew Inverse Moon couldn't be trusted.

I ignored the scientist and split up with Lingzi to search the place.

This was the forefront—a dead end. A Varmint could be hiding in the shadows.

"…Nothing. Maybe they're farther in?"

"Mmm…"

We scanned the whole place and found no trace.

We might have to check out every other path.

"Well, that's not good!" Spica shouted. "And there's no Dark Core or Star Citadel, either! Maybe we should blow the whole thing up! Cornelius, you got any bombs that can wipe out a whole country?!"

"We are not blowing this place up. Losing these minerals would be a net loss for humanity."

"Who cares about these rocks? Humanity's weird! Off with you!"

"You're a part of humanity, too, you kno— Hey, don't smash them! That was the biggest clump!"

Headache-inducing voices echoed in the cave.

The light of the minerals was blinding.

"…You think the Varmint took Meihua, too?" Lingzi stared at the purple wall with worry.

"I don't know…but that could be."

"Yeah. I hope everyone is all right…"

I didn't want to give her false hope. But being negative wasn't good, either.

We could whine and cry after we looked through the whole of Star Cave.

"Let's go, Lingzi."

"Yeah…"

I placed my hand on her back and turned around to search one of the other routes, but then…

"Wait. I hear something." Fuyao froze, hand on her katana's hilt.

I came to a halt after seeing the ominous look on her face.

"What? You sure it's not your imagination?"

"There's a slight shake in the air."

Anxious, I strained my ears.

I had no idea what a "shake in the air" even sounded like.

I could hear the echoes of our footsteps, Spica and Cornelius's banter, and something crawling overhead…

"Listen to me! Stop crushing the precious minerals!"

"But they're perfect for training my grip!"

"You're already strong enough as is! You don't understand!"

"You got that right! But you're the one who doesn't understand, Cornelius."

"No, that's you, Your Highness! Mandala minerals might revolutionize energy as we know it! Can your fists do that?!"

"No, what I mean is that you don't understand death's right around the corner."

"What? Death…?"

Spica playfully pointed right above Cornelius.

The girl wearing a lab coat looked up.

Then I saw a giant shadow charge at her.

"Eek!"

I was paralyzed from the shock.

Fuyao clicked her tongue and ran. Lingzi hurried to take her iron fan out of her pocket … But they were both too late.

The shadow plummeted on top of Cornelius.

Bwoooom!! The cave itself shook.

Lingzi and I screamed as we were swept off our feet.

Sand fell on us. My butt hurt.

I tottered back up while helping Lingzi off the ground.

Dust covered my whole view. I could only see a giant black shadow beyond.

"Heh… So this is a Varmint." Fuyao wore a bold grin.

The real thing was far bigger than I imagined. I'd pictured it being the size of a big dog, but it was larger than a fat elephant.

It had two forelegs and two hind legs. It resembled a dog in shape, but true to the stories, it was pitch-black and had a blurry silhouette.

"Eep…" Lingzi covered her mouth and retreated a step.

The Varmint was chewing.

What's it eating? Was there any food over there? My brain refused to see the reality.

It swallowed.

Spica clapped, laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! It ate Cornelius!"

What? Wh-what? What're you laughing about…?!

Fear took hold of my body, and then the Varmint kicked the ground.

The black mass ran like the wind—toward Lingzi and me.

"WAAAH!!"

I fell on my butt again.

Cornelius alone wasn't enough to fill its belly. We were next on the menu. To think my first death would be at the jaws of a fiery beast.

Hold up.

First? No, that's not right.

We're in the Netherworld. Mulnite's Dark Core isn't here. This is gonna be my last *death.*

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open at my belated realization.

"Komari!!" A high-pitched voice echoed in Star Cave.

Peafowl-like clothing fluttered with the wind.

Lingzi stopped the Varmint by smacking her fan on its face.

I'm saved… But only for a moment.

The Varmint let out a ferocious roar. Lingzi yelped and staggered. She lost her balance, then was blown back like a ball.

"Lingzi…!"

Bloodlust.

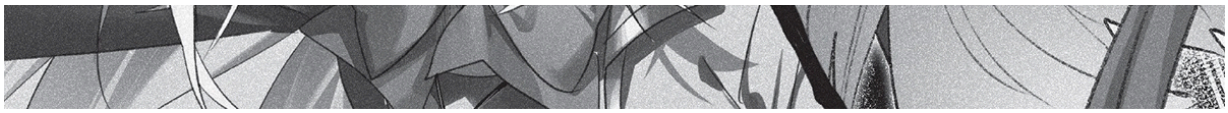
I didn't have the time to look back at my friend.

The beast's jet-black eyes were right in front of me.

Anger, sadness, agony, and every other negative emotion thrashed at my skin.

I was as still as a frog under a snake's glare.


©riichu



What the heck?

How can a creature be so sinister?

"W-wait…," I said.

Not that the creature would listen.

The Varmint slowly raised its forelegs. If those things hit me, I would be lucky to get off with a few broken bones. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for impact, when…

"Do you want to die?"

I heard a *swish*, followed by a chilling scream.

Afraid of what I would see, I opened my eyes a crack and found the Varmint writhing in agony.

I looked up in disbelief. Its black forelegs were spinning in the air. Fuyao shook the miasma off her katana and glared at her enemy in a way that would make any child wail.

"Looks like you're ready to go down."

She lowered her stance and sped up.

The Varmint recovered quickly, too.

I heard an eerie crackling noise and noticed the beast's injured forelegs re-form, rising like bread in an oven to become a pair of blades.

Fuyao struck with her katana from the side.

A violent wind blew as steel (?) smashed against steel.

Fuyao realized a single blow wouldn't break her foe's new limbs and pulled away for a moment before aiming for its defenseless torso. However, the Varmint noticed immediately, and with a *crack*, it grew a fifth leg to protect itself.

Another roar.

Fuyao laid down her ears to dodge the boom and jumped high, boosting herself off the heaps of mining equipment.

She plunged her sword into its back.

Another scream, now of pain.

The Varmint writhed like a fish on land with every twist of Fuyao's blade. It tossed itself and smashed into the wall, creating a shock wave so large, it felt like an earthquake.

I was frozen solid, my jaw on the ground.

The writhing beast. Cornelius eaten. Fuyao making a show of her

superhuman combat prowess… Was this a dream?

"Komari! We have to help Fuyao…!" Lingzi ran up to me.

She had a cut on her cheek, but nothing major. I was relieved.

Now, then… *I would like to help, but clearly, if I went in there, I'd end up squashed like a bug, you know?*

"That beast is like a clump of willpower!"

All of a sudden, Spica was right next to me, lollipop in her mouth.

Her eyes glowed brightly and her smile was deep, as though she was watching a sports match.

"And no ordinary willpower. Energy created from anger and sadness. Very poor taste, if you ask me! What kind of sick terrorist made that?!"

"I don't care! What about Fuyao?!"

"Fuyao's strong. In terms of raw physical strength, she's number one among the Lunae. Although she lost some confidence after you beat her to a pulp!"

"Should I apologize?!"

"Don't worry! She won't give up until she's reached her goals… Huh?"

Then we saw something shocking.

The Varmint grew multiple new arms. Or rather…tendrils.

"Guh…" Fuyao groaned in pain for the first time.

The myriad tentacles squirmed like an anemone and wrapped around Fuyao. Cut one, and two more would come. The tentacles regenerated like branches of a tree from every surface she sliced, desperate to capture their target.

The beast lifted her by the ankles into the air.

The katana fell from her hand.

Fuyao had ended up hanging upside down in the blink of an eye.

"Bad news! Look at that!"

I gasped.

The Varmint created new tentacles in the form of spears. Naturally, their sharp ends were pointed at the now immobilized Fuyao. At her heart.

Lingzi screamed. I did, too.

I had to do something. Fuyao was a killer and a scoundrel who'd

tricked Karla and Karin, but I would have to put that out of mind right now.

"Lingzi! I'm sorry!"

"Huh? Whaaa…?!"

I grabbed her shoulder and drew my face to her cheek.

"Ohhh!" Spica whistled. "You're doing it?! Go get 'em!"

I will.

I aimed for the shallow cut on Lingzi's cheek and licked it.

Ba-thump.

I felt my heart beat faster.

Rainbow-colored mana overflowed, canceling out Star Cave's lighting.

The ceiling creaked and began crumbling with grand thunder.

※

"…My."

Tremolo Parcostella stopped swinging her ax.

It was getting noisy upstairs.

Were the mercenaries fighting one another again?

Then the little beasts who helped her mine jumped up. Animals like black shadows—Varmints. They rubbed against her legs, trying to communicate something.

"…I see. It's Spica and Terakomari… So they're finally inside Star Cave."

She was connected to the beasts through willpower.

What one of them saw was transmitted instantaneously to the rest.

The little beasts said Spica and Terakomari were fighting a midsize beast above.

Tremolo removed her helmet, wiped off her sweat with a hand towel, and smirked.

Her prediction was right.

Whether they had tailed her from Lumiere Village or used some other method of locating them, Spica and Komari had found Star Citadel's hideout.


©riichu



Yusei had insisted that the obstacles to their goals were the Wicked God Slayer, the Crimson Vampire Princess, and Observatory.

Getting rid of two of them at once would be superbly efficient.

"What do you say, Rakshasa?"

A giant black mass crouched next to her.

An accumulation of sadness willpower.

Rakshasa—the ultimate Varmint, created by Yusei's Core Implosion.

It could only roar like a beast, but Tremolo understood this to mean, "Not yet the time."

"I see. Yes, mining for the Dark Core is the priority. A draining job, but it's our job. Let's do this."

Cloing. Cloing.

The fleeting sounds of the biwa echoed through Star Cave.

Tremolo gripped her ax and swung it against the wall again and again.

She had to help look for the Dark Core in exchange for borrowing Star Cave's Varmints.

I wonder what Nefty is up to right about now.

There were no Correspondence Crystals in the Netherworld. One couldn't keep in constant contact.

Eh, probably gobbling down pizza in her office.

She only had to focus on her job.

※

The rainbow mana triggered the ceiling's collapse.

Rubble rained down with an uncanny snapping echo. The tentacles restraining Fuyao were torn off one after the other. I stomped on their remains like they were writhing lizard tails and shouted a war cry.

"You better be ready for this!!"

I could not possibly look less intimidating. Any rational person

would think I was about to get swatted like a fly.

But now I had confirmation: When I sucked Lingzi's blood, I became impossibly lucky.

"Bweh!"

I tripped, dodging the tentacle rushing at me like a whip out of sheer coincidence.

"Amazingly lame!" Spica laughed. *Shaddup! You fight, too!*

"Watch out!"

An exhilarating *fwsh!* sounded as Lingzi sliced the tentacle coming from ahead with her iron fan.

I didn't have the time to say thanks before the Varmint, contorted under the rubble, launched more and more tentacles to attack me. Just as I thought I was a goner, I began to float.

"Wha—? Wh-whaaaa—?!"

"Hold on tight. A fall might kill you…"

"Lingzi, you can fly?! I thought we couldn't use magic in the Netherworld!"

"Immortals are a flying race to begin with. We can do it as naturally as moving our arms and legs."

The world sure is full of wonders, huh?

The barrage of tentacles chased after us.

The moment I began giving up on life, Lingzi sped up and dodged the Varmint's attacks in the air.

Right, left, up, down, loop the loop. She was like an acrobat.

I heard a *fwm!* with her every sudden change of course, and at the same time, I felt something crawling up my stomach.

"L-Lingzi, slow down…"

"Sorry! But I can't stop!"

"What is up with your semicircular canals…?"

A *boom* thundered as the tentacles crashed into the wall behind us.

I clung to Lingzi, trying to combat my dizziness.

I'll die if I fall. I might die even if I don't fall. I already feel my life slipping away.

Oh? What's that glow I see? A field full of flowers?

Ha-ha, and are those the footsteps of the reaper?

“Good job, Lingzi Ailan!”

I heard Fuyao’s ecstatic voice.

Even as my consciousness kept fading away, I did my best to look down at the ground. There, I witnessed the moment Fuyao struck the Varmint.

It had given her an opening for a lethal attack by shifting its focus to us.

The beast’s thunderous roar of pain shook the air.

Fuyao unleashed another katana slash at the Varmint’s torso.

Miasma spurted from its wound like blood.

Fuyao kept attacking with a flat look on her face and the vehemence of the devil. The black beast’s body was split like tofu.

“It’s no use… It keeps regenerating…!” Lingzi mumbled in despair.

She was right. No matter how quickly Fuyao struck, the miasma kept re-forming, like a scab covering its wounds. That was no normal creature. It seemed to feel pain, but physical attacks proved to be useless against it.

“What do we do…? How long are we gonna keep flying…? I’m already at my limit…”

“Wah?! Stay with me, Komari!”

“Easy! These kinda foes aways have a core of some sort!” Spica cheered.

She was sitting on a chair by the rest area, licking her dang lollipop. The freaking nerve.

“I’ve been watching closely, and I can tell you, there’s a core somewhere inside that shadow! A huge Mandala mineral! Varmints must be Mandala minerals imbued with willpower!”

Just then I realized there was a slight glow in the Varmint’s forehead. That had to be the source of its power Spica was talking about.

“Fuyao! Smash its forehead to pieces!”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Fuyao sliced the tentacles away while moving over to its head, then hacked at it relentlessly. She repeatedly slashed through the black miasma spurting from the creature’s gouged skin.

The Varmint screeched and rolled over.

Fuyao took this window of opportunity to leap and deliver a powerful stab.

From within the beast's forehead, a purple glowing mineral revealed itself.

That was the Mandala mineral.

"Prepare to meet your—"

She must've let her guard down at the last moment. As Fuyao tried to finish her line, a tentacle crept around from behind and restrained her right hand.

"Wha…?!"

Her weapon was incapacitated, and her ankles were next. She fell over.

"Pay attention, girl!!" Spica fumed.

Yelling at her won't solve anything.

I gotta go help her… But I was at my limit. I tasted sourness in my mouth.

"Uph…"

"Huh? Komari— EEEK?!"

I threw up the tomato juice from earlier, right on Lingzi's chest.

I'm sorry. I'll wash it out later.

But the tragedy did not end there.

Lingzi loosened her grip in surprise.

Needless to say, I didn't have enough strength left myself to cling to her.

My barf and I went into free fall.

Lingzi screamed my name. Spica cackled her butt off. Fuyao looked up at me in total confusion.

Mmm…? Free fall?

It was then that I realized—I was on a collision course with the Varmint and Fuyao.

"Terakomari! Break your fall!" Fuyao shouted.

I hadn't the slightest idea how to do that.

I plummeted toward the ground as naturally as an apple dropping from a tree.

Clank!!

A tremendous blow to my head.

"Ow?!"

A ghastly howl thundered next to me.

The Varmint. I hadn't fallen on the ground. I'd fallen on the Varmint.

Now I was guaranteed to end up at the mercy of its tentacles.

I gotta get away. Now*…*

But my consciousness was already fading.

I heard Lingzi shout "Komari! Komari!" from overhead.

I used my last drop of energy to reach out, and then *bam!!*

The black miasma dispersed.

I had no idea what could have possibly happened.

I started falling again, and right as I bid farewell to my dear life, a familiar rainbow mana spread from my body.

My Blood Curse had reached its course.

"…You're nothing if not lucky."

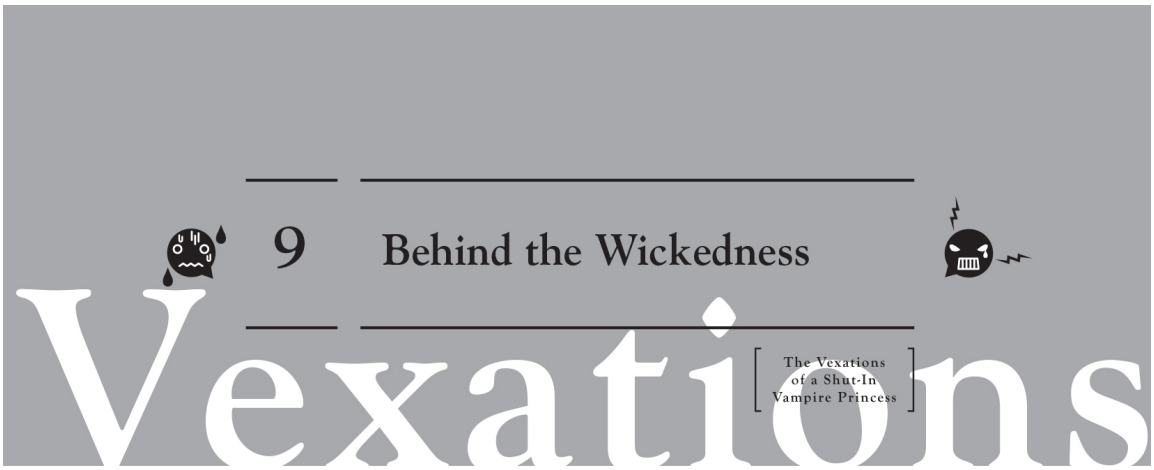
The next thing I knew, I was in Fuyao's arms.

She looked as fed up as she was relieved.

Circumstantial evidence suggested she'd caught me.

I had to thank her. I parted my lips, but the words wouldn't come out. Maybe I'd hit my head too hard.

I heard Lingzi's voice as I blacked out.



"Damn it… Why me…?"

The government office underground.

Neoplus's governor and Star Citadel member Nefty "Coffin Bearer" Strawberry ground her teeth as she lay flat on her belly on the filthy floor.

She had lost her title. Nobody seemed to be coming to save her. Her precious bunny plushie was nowhere to be found.

All because she'd made light of them.

"Nefty, you're strong. But your conceit will be the end of you."

She was reminded of Tremolo's aggravating remark.

Nefty had dismissed everything the bard said, but now that she was in real trouble, she began to see the truth in her words.

"I'm hungry…"

It had been five days since she was thrown into the cell.

The stingy Sapphire calling himself Tryphon Cross had already tortured her a few times.

He'd stabbed her with needles while asking "You are with Star Citadel, aren't you?" "Where is Yusei?" "What is Star Citadel's goal?" "How many of you are there?" and so on.

However, pain did not work on her.

Sandfades had the ability to convert part of their body—one ninth of it, to be precise—into gravel. She could nullify any physical attack she knew was coming by gravelizing.

Point is, I'm starving. It should be dinnertime already…

"Good evening. I brought you dinner."

"!"

Nefty's head shot up.

Tryphon Cross arrived with a plate of pizza.

Her belly rumbled.

How could it not? That was pizza! How could one resist the scent of cheese and meat?

Still, she didn't want him to know she was happy about it. She put on airs and crossed her arms.

"O-oh. Pizza tonight? Where's the usual stale bread?"

"I thought I should spice things up a little. Do you not like pizza?"

"I don't hate it. Not to say that I love it or anything."

"Is that so."

Nefty's eyes were glued to the pizza.

She was drooling. She gulped.

I need it. It looks so good. I need it. I need it. I need it. Tryphon stabbed a slice of pizza with a fork and brought it to his mouth.

"Bon appétit."

He bit into it.

"You're eating it?!?!" Nefty clutched the bars of her cell and screamed.

"Yes?" Tryphon cocked his head. "This is my dinner."

"Wh-wh-wha…?"

Oh. I see how it is. You twisted freak! Nefty glared at Tryphon with bloodshot eyes as he savored the pizza.

"Oh, the marriage between the tomato sauce and the cheese create an exquisitely dynamic *delice*." He even gave his review.

"Uh-huh… It does look good. You're eating all that? Isn't it too much? You'll get fat."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll only eat half of it and throw away the rest."

"Don't waste food!!"

"I bought this with Neoplus taxes. I have money to spare. Oh, isn't pizza bought by the money of the populace especially scrumptious?"

"……"

Nefty trembled from sheer anger and humiliation.

How dare he. How dare he toy with Nefty Strawberry.

"You want some?"

He drew close.

He waved the plate right before her eyes and nose with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"I could give you some. In exchange for intel on Star Citadel."

"……"

Pizza. Star Citadel. Pizza. Star Citadel. Pizza. Star Citadel. Pizza. Star Citadel. Pizza. Star Citadel. Pizza.

The hunger and loathing were making her lose her mind.

The pizza danced in front of her. Steamy, cheesy, finger-licking pizza.

Her rational mind cracked audibly.

Yusei, what am I supposed to do?

Her instincts drove her to reach out from between the bars…

A few minutes later…

Nefty wept while nibbling on stale bread.

"Uuuuuh…uuuuuh… That BASTAAARD…!!"

Her tummy rumbled.

The flames of hatred for Inverse Moon burned within her.

She hadn't expected them to resort to such dastardly tactics. She had been able to keep her dignity, but just by a hair—she was sure she would lose if they tried it again.

Tryphon had said he had a banquet to attend and left.

They really were doing as they pleased with the money of Neoplus.

They must pay. I'll crack open their heads once I escape this place.

But…she had no way to escape.

Without her coffins, Nefty was like any other girl.

Inverse Moon would consume Neoplus at this rate.

Forget about that—they could snatch the treasure hiding in Star

Cave.

"How much more can they humiliate me before they're satisfied…? Hmm?"

Nefty noticed an exposed patch of dirt in the wall at the back of the cell.

How?

Right. Terakomari's magic.

It made sense that part of the underground jail would be crumbling.

She cursed her foolishness for not noticing earlier.

"I'll show you what I'm made of…!"

Nefty grabbed the spoon for spreading butter on the bread.

Uncouth? Who cared? She was fine covering for others, but she had to make up for her mistakes on her own.



According to Lingzi, I'd headbutted the Varmint's core. The hit cracked the Mandala mineral, and the giant shadow crumbled into sand.

It was too ridiculous to believe, but ridiculousness was power when my Blood Curse was activated through Immortal blood. One could say the success of my kamikaze attack had been inevitable.

On top of that…

Once the Varmint crumbled away, the kidnapped child and a few lost people from Neoplus appeared from within it. None of them seemed to be fatally wounded, and they woke up soon after being taken to the hospital.

Spica said the Varmint had taken only their willpower. I didn't get it, but I was relieved they were okay.

The kid's mother ran up to me as soon as I woke up and thanked me again and again with tears in her eyes.

"I don't know how to thank you enough… You're the only one

who listened to my plea. And you actually saved my child…”

“I-it was sheer luck! My headbutt just so happened to work.”

“You took down the Varmint with a headbutt…?! You must have unbelievable strength…”

She wasn’t the only one coming up to me. The relatives of the lost people who had emerged from the Varmint’s belly rushed at me like a tsunami.

They cried their hearts out in gratitude, and some of them even screamed “Master Gandesblood!” as though praying to God.

This is getting weird…

I mean, all I did was barf and fall.

I was (unfortunately) used to being deified by now, but this time it was especially awkward.

“Look at that, Terakomari! Everyone in Neoplus is talking about you!” Spica said.

“Much to my chagrin. How did things end up like this…?”

“They even came up with a nickname for you! Stonehead Komari! I’m sooo jealous. It sounds sooo cool! I wish I had an alias like thaaat!”

“Stop lying!”

What the heck is up with that name? There’s nobody out there with a more flexible mind than mine.

I turned my back on teasing Spica and let out a long sigh.

We were in a room of the Neoplus hospital.

Since I fainted after crashing into the Varmint, they had transported me here along with everyone else who was rescued.

Fortunately, I wasn’t gravely injured.

I had a huge lump on my head, but I woke up within an hour.

That must have been because of the rainbow magic.

“Thank you, Lingzi. Your blood saved me.”

“Tell me if you ever want to suck some more…” She fidgeted, her cheeks red.

By the way, she was wearing a T-shirt she’d bought at the market. Obviously, she couldn’t keep wearing the dress I’d barfed tomato juice on.

I looked away, embarrassed.

"A-anyway, good to hear nobody else got harmed. Everyone the Varmint ate was just unconscious, right?"

"Yup! It wasn't looking to eat them, after all." Spica produced a new lollipop and smiled. "It must've been sucking up their willpower to use as energy. Willpower is produced infinitely so long as you have a soul, so it probably only attacked them to keep them in its belly. Think of it like keeping a hen for its eggs."

"Why does a monster like that exist…?"

"The people who came out of it had a stellagmata—a mark of a star—on them. It's the sign of etiolation; that they were entranced by Yusei. Which means the Varmints are Star Citadel's minions."

How could one be so wicked?

Star Citadel really was not your regular sort of terrorist.

"Also, we didn't find Tremolo or Yusei during our search. They're deeper inside, like insects waiting for spring… At least that's what the Nightsky Ring says. We'll have to pour water into their burrow and drown them. Right, Lingzi Ailan?"

"Huh? Uh…" Lingzi faltered. "I don't know about drowning them… We haven't found Meihua…"

Right. We hadn't achieved our goal yet. I couldn't keep resting on my laurels.

Then I realized.

"…Hey, by the way, is Cornelius okay? The Varmint gobbled her up, too."

"She was arrested."

"What?"

"That's what she gets for mining without permission! Overlook too many crimes, and you'll lose the trust of the people! So I reported her to the police!"

"Wha…?" Lingzi was baffled, too.

Spica must have been doing it just to amuse herself.

"Anyway!" She ignored our reactions and stood up with joy. "Now we know what's up with Star Cave and the Varmints. We don't need to wait for Tryphon to get results anymore. That is Star Citadel's hideout, no doubt about it. Now we just gotta find and smash them."

"We're going into Star Cave again?" I asked.

"And not just that! I'm gonna abuse my power as governor to hold an event. I'm calling it the Great Spelunking."

"What the—?"

"The official statement should be coming soon."

I had a terrible feeling about this.

Any event she'd want to hold had to involve violence.

Smiling, Spica grabbed my arm tightly.

"There you have it! The day of our climactic battle is at hand! Let's have a kickoff party before the Great Spelunking! C'mon, out of the hospital you go, Terakomari!"

"What? I'm not done resting."

"The fees are insane here! If you wanna stay here longer, then cough up ten thousand nuko!"

No way I could pay that.

I felt badly about using the city's tax money, so I gave up and left the hospital.

☆

Night had fallen over the mining city, but it was as busy as ever.

Drunkards were packed into the many establishments lining the downtown area.

Laughter, yelling, and even some sobs drifted out from every corner, along with the smell of food and alcohol.

Every single person here looks so scary.

I knew I would wail so hard I'd deafen myself if someone held me up at the restroom again, so I took special precaution to lay low this time. Unfortunately, Spica ruined my efforts by yelling, "Wow, check out all those guys! They look like they're itching to kill someone!!"

Stop. I'm begging you.

I kept my distance from her, hoping no one would think we knew each other.

"Hey! Stay close to me, or I'll poke your eyes!"

"Ow— Aaah?! I'm here, I'm here! Put those fingers away!"

Spica pulled me by the arm and dragged me into a crowded bar built smack-dab in the middle of the road.

I wasn't the only victim. In addition to Lingzi, who was equally frightened, other members of Inverse Moon such as Fuyao and Tryphon were with us, too. Cornelius was currently in jail, so she was spared.

"One draft beer!" Spica shouted her order the moment she sat down.

"…Wait, you can drink? How old are you?"

"I forget the exact number, but I'm pretty sure I'm over six hundred, at least."

"Bullcrap. No one can live that long," I objected while flipping through the menu.

Hey, they got omelet rice! And the menu says it's "golden flavored"? I gotta find out what that means.

"Don't be silly." Spica cackled. "Immortals have long lifespans, too! By the way, I'm half vampire, half Immortal."

"Spica… Not even Immortals can live for six hundred years," Lingzi said.

"Yes, they can! You just need some guts! People only die because they start thinking, '*Oh no, my time is up*.' The laws of this world can be overwritten through sheer force of will, so if you just keep wishing you wanna live, then you can keep it up forever!"

"Don't be ridiculous." Fuyao sat down across from Spica. "Plenty of people die wishing to survive. You're insulting the weak."

"So you think! But I feel the opposite! And we're both right! Because there's as many truths in the world as there are wills!"

"…That's absurd."

"Fuyao! Stop opposing Her Highness," cut in Tryphon, panicked. "I apologize. The fox lacks a Luna's sense of duty."

"It's fine! We're here to have some drinks and kick back! Recharge for the battle against Star Citadel! Get something for yourself, Tryphon."

"I am very grateful for your generosity… But every item on sale here sounds bad. It would be a waste of money. I'm fine with just

water and beans."

"Whaaat?! You got a bone to pick with my choice of bar?!"

"My utmost apologies. Should I cut my stomach in repentance?"

"Don't give more work to the staff! Do you not realize how much that would inconvenience them?! Your punishment will be to pay the whole tab!"

"……Very well."

Amazing how that seemed to vex him more than seppuku.

"Heh." Amatsu chuckled. "I'll take you up on that offer, then. For starters, I'll have every item on the back of the menu."

"Amatsu…!"

"What, Tryphon? This much shouldn't amount to a dent in your funds, should it? You've got an excess of private property for a former member of the Polar Union's communist party, you cheapskate."

"Ha! You're just talking out of jealousy, pauper. What's wrong with saving up for retirement? I cannot stand to see my valuable assets disappear into your stomach."

"Your assets should be fuming with indignation at the thought of rotting away in your wallet."

"Sophistry… Just take a look at the items on this low-class menu. If I must part with my money, I would rather do so somewhere better. Not to offend Your Highness's tastes."

"The food here looks a lot better than what you make."

"Wha…? That is what I call undignifying! You have no right to talk when you only sit back and eat it!"

"I've had my turn in the kitchen, and I remember my work being well received."

"Only Cornelius liked it! Agh, fine, I won't make you stew ever again. Instead, I'll give you a special dish topped with poison."

"Shut up already…" Fuyao clicked her tongue.

The moment Spica's drink reached the table, she grabbed it and drank it without a single word of cheers.

"*Pfaah!* Okay, okay, stop fighting! Order some food already, or we'll be here until morning! No time to lose!"

"I agree. Let's get one of each. The…"

"You leave anything uneaten, and it's off with your head!"

"…I'll have one bowl of udon."

Amatsu switched course with a straight face. Tryphon smirked in victory.

I'm getting that omelet rice… Then Spica pinched my side.

"Back on topic! That means I'm your elder!"

"D-don't touch me! And what topic?!"

"We were talking about my age! Now that you know it, you have to address me with respect!"

Her voice was 30 percent louder than usual.

Going off the redness of her face, I figured she must've gotten drunk on that single drink.

Everyone in Inverse Moon seemed to be quite considerate of Spica's whims. Probably because she was the leader of their organization and could kill everyone here in the blink of an eye.

But there was something odd about this little terrorist.

She felt like a child, really.

Or maybe she just had a hard time relating to people?

I was sure a girl like her would be the outcast of the class.

Setting aside her real intentions, I had noticed a few things about her: She spoke in a deliberately overbearing manner; she always kept a smile on her face, to an eerie degree; she frequently tried startling people out of nowhere; she ignored the real closeness of her relationships with others to jump past a few steps and get weirdly physical.

From a third-party perspective, you could say she was what they would call "cringe."

Wait, why am I psychoanalyzing this kooky terrorist?

That's just the kind of girl she is. End of story.

"Everyone know what they want to order already? All right, waiteeer! Please take our ordeeer!" Spica waved, smiling.

Right now, what I was truly worried about was whether my flank would survive her pinch.

☆

I had to get out of the toilet alive this time.

Lingzi offered to go with me out of concern, but I was too embarrassed to say yes. I put on a scary face (by my estimation) to make sure no villains would make light of me.

"Ahhh… Why is Spica so loud…?" I sighed as I washed my hands.

It was a get-together from hell. One wrong move, and the terrorists would kill us.

Lingzi and I were like hamsters in a cage.

By this point, the me from just a short while ago would have run away with her tail between her legs.

Why hadn't I done so yet? Because we had a common goal? Or was it…because I was starting to understand them?

"…Whatever, time to go back to the table."

Leaving Lingzi alone was not a good idea. What if Spica was making her cry?

I dried my hands with my handkerchief and hurried out of the restroom.

"Wait."

I leaped like a rabbit.

Another rogue?! I turned toward the voice, trembling in my boots.

A man in Eastern garb was standing by the entrance to the women's restroom with his arms crossed.

"A-Amatsu…? What's up?"

"Ms. Gandesblood—no, Terakomari. I have to tell you something."

His eyes were far sharper than Karla's.

Come to think of it, I had many questions about this man.

Why was he with Inverse Moon? Why hadn't he gone back to Karla? And most importantly…why did he have a letter from my mom?

"Sorry, this is our only chance. Let's go out before Her Highness notices."

"Go out…where?"

"Right outside."

—Core Implosion: *Anachronic Moonbridge*.

Amatsu unsheathed his katana.

I barely had time to be surprised before he slid his sword upward.

The blade cut the air and opened a black "wound."

Confused, I watched as the gap in space grew at lunatic speed.

The view before my eyes was blurry, like the reflection of the moon on water.

"Hmm??"

The refreshing night wind of spring.

The clear cries of bugs.

…Huh? Where am I?

I looked around fearfully.

I seemed to be on top of a hill. Below me was a rural village made up of thatch-roofed houses.

Bright stars and thin clouds adorned the sky.

Something was off. The moon was full just before now, but it had vanished.

"We made the switch safely."

I heard a sword being sheathed.

Amatsu stood there, unsurprised.

"Switch? What do you mean…?"

"The moon phase here is the exact opposite of that of the Netherworld. We're in our original world. What they call the first world, or the Foreworld."

"Wha—?!?!?!"

Our original world… What? Are you serious?

We're not in the Netherworld anymore? We got back that easily? What the hell did this guy do? I was about to break into dance from sheer confusion when Amatsu asked me to calm down.

"My Core Implosion has the power to connect a bridge between the worlds on nights when there's a full moon or a new moon. It

was thanks to it that I could deliver Yulinne Gandesblood's letter to you. Just so you know, this is the flip side of Neoplus. Just a regular old village in this world."

"How?! And why?! What?!"

"Listen—what I'm about to tell you is a secret to Her Highness. You must not tell anyone. If you do, that mysterious power will kill you."

"…"

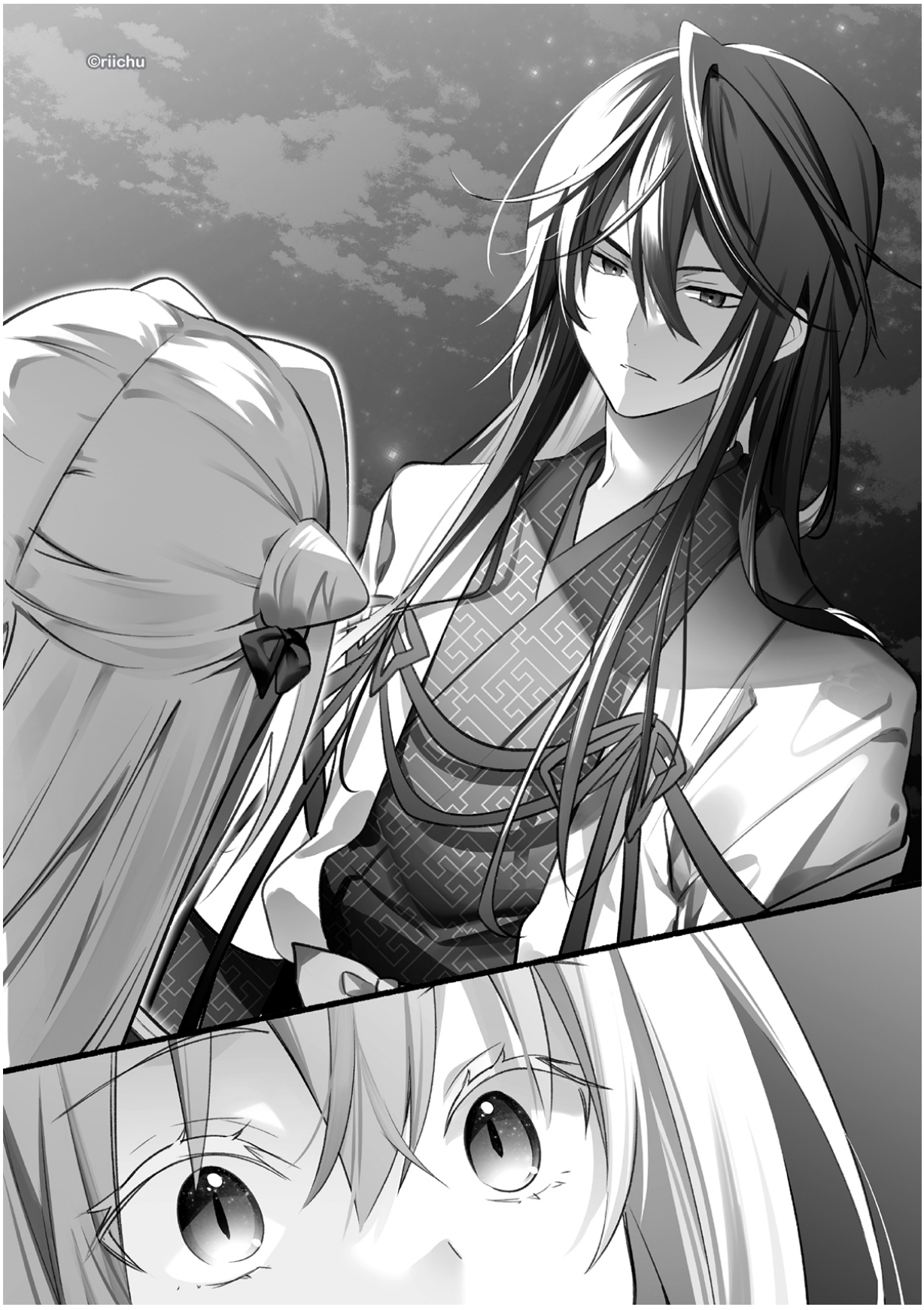
I vaguely remembered Karla's grandma saying something similar…

Okay, okay. Keep calm. It's my turn to get some info out of him.

I took a deep breath and looked directly at him.

"…Fine. I won't tell anyone. Just explain to me what in the world is going on."

"That's what we're here for."


©riichu



Amatsu gazed down at the village.

We could hear the people chatting in their houses; it was dinnertime.

"What I want to tell you, simply put, is to be wary of Spica La Gemini."

"You don't have to tell me…"

"Really? You're the naivest girl out there. You feel even for your enemy."

I couldn't argue with that. My firm belief, the compass of my life, was that people could understand one another by talking it out, even if they had once been at one another's throats.

"I'm not sure where to begin… Okay. I was originally one of the Five Imperial Sabers of the Heavenly Paradise, but the previous Goddess ordered me to infiltrate Inverse Moon."

"You're a spy? So you really weren't with Inverse Moon from the beginning."

"Exactly. And don't let Her Highness know that, okay?"

"Of course." I nodded.

"Thank you… According to the previous Goddess, the world will end if we let the Wicked God Slayer do as she pleases. And this isn't just an assumption. She's seen the future. She knows."

"Was she a fortune teller?"

"…… I see. Karla didn't tell you… That makes my job harder…" Amatsu frowned from the bottom of his heart.

"The previous Goddess is the one with the charm on her face, right?"

"Yes. And she is Karla Amatsu from two years in the future."

"What?"

"Think back on it—weren't her voice and mannerisms similar? That version of Karla Amatsu turned back time twelve years to change the future."

"……Wha…?"

WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!

My scream echoed beneath the new-moon night.

Surprised villagers came out of their houses. They were all beast-folk. This must've been the Lapelico Kingdom.

I could say nothing more, my jaw on the ground.

Amatsu heaved a heavy sigh and explained the truth behind the Heavenly Ball, the previous Goddess's identity, and what had happened to her in the end.

"And so she fulfilled her mission and disappeared."

"Wa-waaah… Waaaaah……!!" The next thing I knew, I was sobbing.

It was such a tragic tale.

I never could've thought all that happened to the Goddess behind the scenes… Well, actually, there had been a lot of foreshadowing, but my mind could barely keep up with the Heavenly Ball as it was.

The other Karla Amatsu sacrificed her own time to stop the terrorists from destroying the world and entrusted her past self with the future.

I could never make that choice.

Karla truly was one amazing Goddess.

"Goddess Karla appeared before me over ten years ago. Naturally, I couldn't believe she was the future Karla Amatsu at first. After all, Karla was nothing but a weak-kneed and impudent child. Who could believe that brat would grow up to be like that?"

"Who's this brat you're talking about…?"

"We don't need to talk about past Karla. The point is I couldn't believe it, but I ended up having to after seeing the proof. It was then Goddess Karla told me about her timeline, the future the terrorists destroyed."

That I couldn't believe.

Inverse Moon taking over the Heavenly Paradise after Karin Reigetsu became Goddess and declaring war on all other countries…

"I was ordered to investigate Inverse Moon when I was sixteen. I quit the Five Imperial Sabers at eighteen, left the Heavenly Paradise, and became a member of Inverse Moon. Odilon Metal, who you defeated before, joined around that same time."

Many merciless terrorists were in Inverse Moon. They had done a lot of harm to me and my friends.

"I worked tirelessly to gain the esteem of Spica La Gemini. I did terrible things you would detest me for. I'm not trying to write off my misdeeds as unavoidable, but at the very least, I had to perform them to fulfill Goddess Karla's orders."

"And then…you got close to Spica."

"Yes. But…" Amatsu hesitated for a moment. "That girl hasn't the least intention of destroying the world. Her thoughts are confined to 'the inside of her room,' so to speak. She's like how you were before."

"What does that mean? She's a shut-in just like me? Ah!"

"Don't worry about hiding it. I already knew you were a shut-in."

"…"

Talk about embarrassing.

"In any case," he said, going back on topic, "I couldn't believe Spica would destroy the world. She just wanted to go to the Netherworld."

"She did say she wanted to turn it into a peaceful paradise… Wait, but you can go to the Netherworld, right? But you never took her?"

"There's a limit on the size of things I can take between worlds. Besides, I didn't feel the need to fulfill the enemy's wish. The only thing I did was tell her about a terrorist named Yusei who was causing trouble in the Netherworld." He frowned. "…To be quite honest, I think Yusei is far more dangerous than Spica."

"Yusei… The leader of Star Citadel, right?"

"Yes. The Netherworld is at war because of her. If it weren't for your mother, the conflict would've encroached on this world by now."

"R-right! You know my mom?!"

"We killed each other a few times when I was an Imperial Saber. About six years ago, she fell victim to a natural disaster and was thrown into the Netherworld. There, she found out about Yusei plunging it into war, and she's been going up against her since. Yusei will end up invading this world if we don't stop her. Just like how Nerzanpi Rocha damaged the Enchanted Lands."

"W-wait—hold on. Is my mom…?"

"She's alive and well."

"Not that. I mean, yes, that's good to know, but… Why did she never come back to …?"

"She's been fighting. Sacrificing herself…for the sake of the people."

That was Yulinne Gandesblood for you.

Nothing like this shut-in vampire.

But…

"But what about a quick visit or something?"

"As you know, it's difficult to go back and forth between this world and the Netherworld. Besides, my Core Implosion can only transport small things. She's too tall."

"But you could transport me."

"You're short. You're just small enough to count as a carry-on."

"You make it sound like I can fit under your seat!"

"But isn't it good news, though? Now you can just stay over here in this world."

I was at a loss for words.

It was only just hitting me that the homeworld I'd yearned for was right in front of me.

But I still had a job to do.

"…I can't go home now. I have to go to Star Cave."

"Of course. Let's continue, then." Amatsu crossed his arms, unfazed. "While I spied on Inverse Moon, I also assisted the mercenary group Full Moon. From my experience within both organizations, I can tell you that Yusei is more dangerous… And the Goddess herself mentioned that Tremolo Parcostella plans to lay waste to the Foreworld."

"Huh? She's really using strings to…"

"She has a hidden power."

"What? Another one?"

"We don't know what activates it, but she can control black miasma. Goddess Karla told me Tremolo is responsible for killing Nelia Cunningham in the future."

I was speechless.

Amatsu paid no attention to my bewilderment and continued:

"That's how dangerous Star Citadel is… But no matter how

strongly I advised Goddess Karla to be more wary of Yusei than Spica, she refused to budge. She insisted it was Spica La Gemini who had destroyed her world. Apparently, even Tremolo ended up under Spica's rule in that future."

"Mmm…? Wait, so then does that mean Tremolo joined Inverse Moon in that timeline…?"

"The world is never certain. I still don't know who is friend and who is foe." Amatsu looked up at the new moon and sighed. "But within this haze, I trust Karla alone. I want to believe what she says is right. So I wanted to warn you to watch out for Spica."

"…I see."

"By the way, apparently, you'll eventually fight Spica and die."

"Could you at least have broken the news with a bit more gravitas…?"

I wanted to object, but I couldn't say it would be impossible. I could easily picture Spica slaying me.

Amatsu gave me a sidelong glare.

His kimono fluttered with the spring breeze, and he softly opened his lips.

"Don't trust Inverse Moon. Not just Spica; Tryphon and Cornelius are brimming with wicked will, too. You'll wind up hurt if you get too close to them."

"…What about you and Fuyao?"

"I don't deserve to be trusted, either. I'm just a scoundrel who dedicates himself to deceiving others. As for Fuyao…she's the most dangerous of them all at present."

"But she saved me."

"She's been acting weird since we got to Neoplus. Something seems to be vexing her."

I hadn't noticed, but he had spent more time with her before.

"Talk's over." Amatsu turned around. "Be careful, Terakomari Gandesblood. Karla will be heartbroken if you die."

☆

Amatsu activated his Core Implosion again, and the scenery returned to the bar in the Netherworld.

"Where were youuu?!" Spica pestered me, red in the face.

She stinks. She's hammered.

I then noticed she was holding a leash, which connected to a collar around Lingzi's neck. "Save me," she said, tears in her eyes.

Now it was war.

"Stop picking on Lingzi!" I yelled.

"She's my pet now!" Spica shouted.

Fuming, I carefully explained that, actually, she was my wife. Spica burst into laughter while Lingzi's face boiled over, and I returned to my seat in embarrassment and took a sip of oolong tea. However, Spica had spiked it with mustard, and I spat it all out like a fountain, hitting Tryphon directly in the face, which started twitching with indignation. That only made Spica cackle even louder.

So ended our get-together.

The fatigue took over me the moment I got into the room.

What the heck's the problem with her?

She's even worse than my little sister!

I had nothing but respect for Amatsu for putting up with her for the years he'd been a spy.

"*Haaah…* I need a bath." I sighed, walking to my suite's bathroom.

We'd swapped out the cheap inns we'd stayed at so far for a luxury hotel with private bathrooms. "We got all this tax money to spare! Let's stay somewhere nice!" Spica had exclaimed.

So it was time to sweep away the fatigue with a nice bath.

My head was about to explode from everything Amatsu had revealed.

Clack.

I opened the bathroom door and found Fuyao, stark naked.

"…"

"……"

Wet hair, flushed cheeks, a moisture-shrunken tail.

She stared at me through the steam.

I stared at her body unthinkingly.

She was covered in scars.

Clearly, she couldn't have gotten the injuries littering her chest and sides just from falling down the stairs.

I shivered. Had she gotten them during the fight with the Varmint?

"…What're you looking at?"

"Waaah?! S-sorry!"

I turned around in a panic.

I heard Fuyao's damp feet carry her to bed. She rummaged through her bag, took out her underwear and pajamas, and started putting them on like I wasn't even there.

"Wh-why are you here?"

"…You didn't hear? This is a two-person bedroom."

And why are you with me?

I could take a guess. Spica must've decided that on a whim.

"…Huh? But didn't we come here together from the bar…?"

"Are you blind? I left that place a while ago. Merrymaking only wears me out…"

Fuyao ended up putting on her pajamas before I recovered from my confusion.

They were made for beast-folk: There was a hole for the tail.

…I have no idea how to talk to this girl.

But there was something I had to ask her.

"Fuyao, are you hurt?"

"…? No, I'm not."

"But those scars…"

She clicked her tongue. "…What do you care?"

"How can't I?! We gotta go to the hospital!"

"These are old wounds. They're not from the Varmint."

I didn't understand.

If they were old…then how come the Dark Core hadn't healed them?

"Ha." Fuyao chuckled, as if she had read my mind. "Scars… changes to the body are recognized as part of the individual with enough time, so the Dark Core stops having effect on them. I always let my wounds heal away from the Dark Core's area of effect. That's

why the scars remain."

"B-but why would you do that?"

"Pain makes you grow."

Is she stupid?

Nobody likes pain. It's like poison that numbs your heart.

But…if those scars weren't from today's battle, then I had no reason to say anything about them.

"Get lost. I'm going to bed."

"…You're not drying your tail?"

She glared daggers at me.

I was so scared, I wanted to coop myself up, but this was my chance.

She had saved me two times now, and I hadn't thanked her yet.

I mustered my courage and parted my lips.

"Thank you for today. You saved my life."

Pomf! Fuyao buried her face in her pillow.

So she sleeps face down?

Her tail wagged, and she sighed with annoyance.

"…I'm going to kill you one day. I couldn't let that monster snatch my prey."

"Are you still mad about what happened in the Heavenly Paradise?"

"You humiliated me. I resent you down to the very marrow of my bones… But I won't kill you now. Because you're not ready to die."

I tilted my head.

"…You said that before. What does it mean? You don't kill people…indiscriminately?"

"That would make me no different from a beast. And I'm no beast."

Amatsu had said that something was bothering Fuyao. Looking at her again now, I did think she seemed to be acting strange. Her other silly personality wasn't showing up. And her third (?) personality, the one who had come out before the restaurant, wasn't appearing, either…

Anyway, trying to understand her more now could be a good idea.

I looked through my backpack and took out a pack of inari sushi. I'd bought it before going to the bar, since Fuyao had seemed to want some.

"Hey, Fuyao, could you please tell me why you think that way?"

"Shut up. It's lights-out time for kids."

"Consider this an afterparty. Look, I even brought inari sushi."

"!"

Fuyao's tail and ears shot up. She seemed interested.

"Well, we wouldn't want it to go bad," she mumbled, sitting up.

"Do you have a split personality? Where's the other one?"

"She's asleep. She's been quiet since we got to Neoplus. She always shows up to ruin the mood, but…"

Fuyao talked in between bites of sushi. Her expression was flat. Rather, it was her usual stern terrorist look. But going by how her tail swayed rhythmically, I thought she was in a good mood.

"…She hasn't been reacting at all lately. I have control all the time now. It's tiring."

"That's normal for most people… When did this happen? Did you always have a split personality?"

"It was some years ago. I think I had even more alters before, but they all converged into the other at some point."

What? I couldn't possibly understand that without a degree in psychiatry.

The point was that Fuyao right now seemed to be the original.

I felt like it was easier to talk to this one.

"I see. But I can't imagine there being another me inside me… Sounds complicated."

"Not really. Our base beliefs are the same. She also respects that people should choose their place to die."

"That thing about you not killing those who aren't prepared to die?"

"Yeah. I have only killed those who have stood against me prepared to die. No exceptions." Fuyao sighed. "…Is that enough? That's about it. I have nothing interesting to say."

"Why are you with Inverse Moon? What's your goal?"

"…My goal is to be stronger. I joined Inverse Moon because…Her Highness took me under her wing."

"Spica? Where were you born? The Lapelico Kingdom?"

"…"

Maybe I asked too many things at once. I couldn't tell if she was mad or unsure how to respond or something else.

After a long pause, Fuyao spoke again.

"I was born in a rural village in the Lapelico Kingdom that no longer exists. It was destroyed. I became a homeless orphan."

"Wha…?"

"And after a streak of bad luck, I ended up crawling on the dirt somewhere I didn't know. It was then that I met Her Highness. I don't like that girl, but I do owe her."

Fuyao reached for her third inari sushi. She must've been hungry after not eating anything at the bar.

I kept quiet. I didn't know what to say. The fact her village was destroyed was too heavy for me to react to.

"Uhhh," Fuyao said, maybe feeling awkward from the silence. "And what's your goal? Are you living for something specifically?"

"I…" I thought for a moment before replying. "…For vacation? And world peace, yeah."

"How admirable."

"You're not putting me down for it?"

"There's no point. Nothing I say could make you abandon that ideal. Tryphon said people can never understand one another… Couldn't agree more."

"Hey, you *are* putting it down! Just indirectly."

"I'm not. The whole of humanity wants what you're trying to achieve. If there was world peace, nobody would suffer from war. Even Her Highness, and I, and everyone else in Inverse Moon wish for the same… The problem is we see how hard it is to make that a reality, and through our struggles, we wound up being branded as terrorists. That's why you're so noble…for screaming about world peace without hesitation."

I was shocked. Fuyao wasn't lying.

Could it be? Was it really possible that in the right situation, this foxgirl and I could come to understand each other?

She was a hopeless terrorist and a killer who'd ridiculed Karla's dream, but even so, maybe we could reconcile.

"Y-yeah!" I grabbed the inari sushi pack and brought it to Fuyao's mouth. "Of course everyone wants world peace! And if peace comes to the Netherworld, then you'll be able to eat all the inari sushi you want!"

"I don't care that much about inari sushi…"

"Eat it! There's still a lot more!"

"No, you have some— BGH!"

I shoved the sushi into her mouth.

She resisted at first, but she soon gave in and started chewing, her cheeks rosy.

That was too bold to do to a terrorist. But now I knew she didn't kill arbitrarily. She had been honest with me and said people should be able to choose when to die.

Fuyao swallowed the sushi and glared at me.

"…Don't get too cocky, or I'll kill you."

"B-but you liked the food, didn't you?"

"…"

She neither affirmed nor denied my question.

The faint hope of us becoming friends welled up in my chest.

Fuyao showed no enmity. No hostility. I could even feel some gentleness from this terrorist.

So I took a step forward.

"…We can make world peace a reality. It can't be that hard."

"You're delusional. The world is full of terrible conflict."

"The war in the Netherworld will end soon. I know so because my mom is working on it."

"…"

Fuyao's expression froze, but I didn't notice.

She had told me a lot about herself, and I thought it only fair to tell her about me. My mouth couldn't keep from running.

"She's amazing. She's fighting somewhere out there for world peace. I thought she died a long time ago, but a little while ago, I

learned she's okay."

"I see."

"She sent me a message asking me to help those in need. So I want to try to achieve world peace. I want to be like her one day… Although I doubt I could ever be half the woman she is."

"…I see."

"I feel like I'll meet her soon. But I feel like I won't be able to talk. I don't know what to say to her… Hey, would you like to meet her? The Empress says she loved fighting, so maybe you'll get along."

I heard a slash.

A cut formed on my cheek.

The ceiling and the floor swapped places after the sharp pain hit me.

I was smacked onto the mattress.

Fuyao had pinned me to the bed in the blink of an eye.

Crrk! She plunged down her katana, burying it next to my ear.

"Wha…?"

Fuyao's face was right in front of mine, her eyes glowing with hostility.

She spoke in so low a voice, her words felt chilly.

"A daughter does not bear the sins of her mother. But this tests my restraint."

"Wh-what's the deal, Fuyao…?"

"Yulinne Gandesblood destroyed my hometown."

My heart stopped.

The memories came back instantaneously.

Cherry blossoms prancing in the air of the Eastern Capital. In the middle of the blurry scene, a wounded foxgirl let out a series of hoarse screams.

"I don't care about your dream or anyone else's! I only care about accomplishing my goals!

"I will be stronger than anyone else. I'll show you!

"I will exact my revenge on Yulinne Gandesblood for destroying

my hometown!”

Cloing. A switch flipped.

“Sorry. Fuyao went a bit too far.”

I was befuddled. Those words had come from Fuyao’s own mouth.

The new inhabitant of her body furrowed her brows with worry and reached toward me.

“You’re not hurt, are you? Ah, she cut your cheek. I’m sorry.”

“Wh-wh-wha…?”

“Fuyao has some issues.”

It wasn’t her chirpy “tail” personality. And obviously not her aloof “head” personality.

It was like an entirely different person was taking over her body to make her talk.

Is this her third, or even a fourth, personality…?

Cloing. A switch flipped again.

“Sorry! Made you bleed, eh?!”

Now it was her “tail” personality.

Fuyao smiled and pulled the katana out of the bed.

I could barely keep myself from shaking. Even now, she emanated bloodlust.

I’d stepped on a land mine. Just when I thought I was starting to understand her.

“The ‘head’ is pretty delicate. Without me—the ‘tail’—to back her up, she wouldn’t even be able to stand on her own.”

“…You… You’re…”

“Don’t be scared. I won’t kill you. But I should let you know, Neoplus’s miasma really messes with my mental state.”

“What was that other personality just now…?”

“Well, the ‘tail’ used to be split into multiple personalities. They blended together with the passage of time… But now it seems like they’re differentiating again. I guess the miasma is keeping me from fronting like usual. That swirling willpower of sadness is mixing my personalities around, making them come out all weir—”

Cloing. A switch flipped again.

"Shut up already. My head hurts. I'm going to sleep."

"F-Fuyao!"

"You go to sleep, too."

After that, she refused to respond.

Setting aside the multiple personality issue… Maybe Fuyao and I weren't meant to understand each other.

I couldn't imagine my mom destroying Fuyao's hometown, but for whatever reason, the foxgirl clearly resented her.

Frustrated, I brought my hand to my cheek.

I couldn't sleep.

How much suffering was this foxgirl carrying on her shoulders?

☆

"HELL YEAH!! I'M OUT OF THAT STUPID CELL!!"

Midnight.

In the backyard of the government offices, a girl howled at the moon.

Her clothes were tattered. Her body was covered in mud and scrapes. She was clutching a worn-down spoon in her right hand, and there was a hole just big enough to fit a person by her feet.

In but a single night, Nefty Strawberry had risked it all to dig her way out of Inverse Moon's underground cell.

"Heh… Heh-heh-heh… Just you wait. I'll kill all of you."

The flames of revenge burned within her.

They had stolen everything from her. And now they were plotting to steal everything from Star Citadel. She would turn them into mummies in return.

But for that, she needed her coffins. Nefty could not take on Spica or Terakomari alone. She resigned herself to searching for her coffins inside the building.

I just hope they didn't throw them away… Nefty tossed her spoon

aside and sneaked to the back door like a ninja.

But then: "Who's there?!!"

"Agh!"

The guards found her right away.

Two people in uniform. *Back to the cell?!* She broke out in a cold sweat, but then she remembered she had no reason at all to be worried. After all, she was Count Sandberry—their boss. In fact, this was her chance to prove the other her was a fake.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Nothing to worry about on this side."

"G-Governor Sandberry?! Why are you here…? And what happened to you?"

"Just took a bit of a tumble. Oh, but don't worry; I'm not hurt. By the way, have you seen my coffins?"

The guards looked at each other before glancing at her in suspicion.

"You said you didn't need them anymore and ordered us to burn them."

There could not be worse news.

They burned my stuff?!?! Just before she pulled out her hair, Nefty noticed the weird stares the guards were giving her.

"…Excuse me, Governor. What do you put on pizza?"

"Huh? What'd you just say?"

"It's our password. You gave it to us. You told us that if someone who looked like you ever showed up, we should ask you for it."

What the…?

Inverse Moon is too damn smart…!

"…U-um, what was it again? My brain's a little scrambled from my fall, ha-ha. Mind letting me off without the password just this once?"

"No. *What do you put on pizza?*"

"……Onions?"

The look on the guards' faces changed. They glared at her as if she was an intruder.

"She's a fake!! Capture her!!" The thunderous yell echoed throughout the entire building.

"I'M THE REAL ONE!!!"

Nefty ran for her life.

Guards materialized from every direction. “Kill her!” they yelled, in an unbelievably inappropriate display for government workers. Nefty was crying already. They were supposed to be her men!

Damn it, damn it, damn it!

You’ll pay for this!!

A few minutes later…

She managed to lose them by a hair.

Exhausted, Nefty sank to the ground of a filthy back alley. She was covered in bruises from tripping multiple times while fleeing. Just a few days ago, she had been living it up as governor, and now she was reduced to an outlaw… What had she done to deserve this?

“Sons of guns! I’m sick of this!”

Things were looking awful. She was in the palm of Inverse Moon’s hand.

This can’t be happening to me!

Then Nefty saw something even more disheartening on a notice board.

An official government announcement.

“Wh-what the hell?!”

She tore the paper off the board and brought it close to her face. It was an announcement for an event called the Great Spelunking, held by none other than Count Sandberry.

They’re messing with me again?! But it didn’t end there.

◆ Announcement: Let’s kill the criminals during the Great Spelunking!

With each passing day, more and more people are falling victim to the Varmints in Star Cave. Just recently, a medium-size specimen appeared in the plaza in front of Star Cave and kidnapped a small child. More residents of Neoplus have been attacked since.

According to government investigation, the Varmints are under the control of a terrorist group we have identified as Star Citadel. These threats to the peace hide in Star Cave and plot to destroy public order in Neoplus. We cannot allow them to run free.

For that reason, the government of Neoplus hereby asks all mercenaries in Neoplus, with or without a mining license, to join hands in a grand-scale exploration of Star Cave to discover Star Citadel's hideout and wipe them out, along with their Varmints. We have identified two people as leading the charge in destroying Neoplus: Yusei and Tremolo Parcostella.

You will be remunerated for your participation and the completion of the request. Please help us build a better future for Neoplus.

"……Oh, shit."

Oh, shit.

Nefty's hands shook, and a cold sweat ran down her back.

She'd underestimated Spica La Gemini.

That stupid vampire had some malevolent willpower in her, sure, but Nefty hadn't expected her to be *this* ruthless. Spica was turning against her all the fame, fortune, and power Nefty had worked so hard to build.

"WHAT NOW?!" she screamed, pulling her hair.

Tremolo was still in Star Cave. She was probably prepared to kill Terakomari and Spica while she looked for the Dark Core, but she couldn't possibly have the power to take on all the mercenaries in Neoplus.

What could Nefty do?

Tell me, Yusei…

Plop. Something fell behind her.

Nefty turned around on reflex. Her jaw dropped from the shock of finding her bunny plushie there.

"Y-Yusei?! Yusei!!"

She quickly scooped the plushie into her arms.

It had to be Yusei. The bunny didn't move without willpower.

"Thank goodness! Oh my gosh!" Nefty sobbed, rubbing her face on the bunny's belly. "Yusei, Yusei, Yuuuseeei! You gotta hear this! Spica's crazy! Tremolo's gonna die! What can I do?!"

She could feel her willpower coming from the plushie. The soothing power of the stars.

Then Nefty received the answer to all her problems.

"Huh? A Magic Stone? Nerzanpi's? But then Star Cave will…"

The plushie shook a little.

Yusei whispered to her not to worry.

All her fears dissipated.

There could be no problem if Yusei reassured her so.

"Yeah. Tremolo will be fine. Okay."

The light of dawn shone upon Neoplus.

Nefty smirked with the plushie in her arms.

Then she noticed someone approaching.

※

The boss of Black Scorpion, Eugena Scorpin, stalked down the alley impatiently.

She was red in the face. Her lackeys (the guy with the beard and the shirtless guy) propped her up as they tottered across Neoplus under the glow of morning.

"…Boss, you drank too much."

"How else am I supposed to get through this bullshit?! Hurry up to the next stop!"

"It's already morning. I think that's enough for toda—"

"Shaddup!" She slapped her naggy lackey silent.

She had already gone on one hell of a pub crawl.

That's what it took to drown her sorrow.

Until recently, her life as a small-time thug had been going off without a hitch.

She would find wimps and out-of-towners, drag them to the back alley, and mug them. Her nose was beyond exceptional; she never got too greedy, and she always booked it right before the guards showed up. It had been two or three years of smooth sailing.

She was about to become queen of the petty criminals in Neoplus.

But those brats sent it all crashing down.

Terakomari and Fuyao…was it?

It should have been a simple job. Just kill a girl who had a bounty on her head. But it had ended with her getting beaten up, and the Black Scorpion's reputation going down the drain.

"They'll pay…! I'll kill them the next time I see them!"

"That's the spirit! Cheers!"

Just then she heard clapping.

A bizarre girl stood next to a dumpster.

Brown skin, a golden hair ornament, a rabbit plush in her arms, and a proud, scornful glare in her eye.

But there was something wrong about her. She was covered in mud. Her clothes were in tatters, and she wasn't even wearing shoes. She looked too impoverished for her haughty bearing.

She also seemed familiar, somehow…

"Boss! That's Governor Sandberry!"

"Governor…?"

Don't be stupid… But she really was.

The legendary ruler who had brought prosperity to Neoplus.

She marched over to them wearing a smile brimming with confidence.

"You're Black Scorpion, aren't you? The gang that's been wrecking public safety in Neoplus."

"Ha! Are you here to arrest us? What an honor to have the governor herself do it."

"No, no. I'm here to recruit you."

Recruit…? The three of them cocked their heads.

Nefty giggled. "I want to get rid of Terakomari Gandesblood and Fuyao Meteorite."

"!"

"Wanna lend a hand? You have it out for them, don't you?"

Eugena took a step back on reflex.

She did want to destroy Terakomari and Fuyao, but what was with this girl's aura? It was far more intimidating than that of the most seasoned of mercenaries.

"…What are you plotting?"

Governor Sandberry chuckled.

The sunrise illuminated the girl, revealing her inexpressive, corpse-like face.

Governor Sandberry spoke.

"Truth is, I'm in this group called Star Citadel. We want to destroy humanity. I'm in charge of guarding our leader, Yusei, and procuring resources—but that's beside the point. Right now, I've got one job: eliminating Terakomari and Spica, the morons who are turning this town to shit. And you three are going to help me do it."



Neoplus central plaza was burning with excitement.

There were mercenaries as far as the eye could see, each and every one thirsting for money and blood.

They numbered at least a thousand.

I watched from my hiding place, getting dizzy just from imagining the sheer heat they were generating.

Why were they all here? Because of Spica's master plan—the Great Spelunking.

The mercenaries were all staring at the stage set in the plaza. Or rather, at the girl standing proudly atop it: Governor Sandberry.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for coming out here today!"

Her clear voice shook my eardrums.

The mercenaries were hanging on her every word.

"As you know, Neoplus is in big trouble! The Varmints have spilled over from Star Cave and are making our good citizens suffer!"

The pitch-black beasts had been popping up outside Star Cave and attacking people for a few days now.

"The source of the problem is clear as day: the terrorist group known as Star Citadel! From deep within their hiding place in Star Cave, they train the Varmints to attack our people to steal our right to the Mandala minerals!"

Governor Sandberry clenched her hand into a fist in indignation.

"They've gotta pay!" the mercenaries shouted.

"And they will!" she responded. "The hammer of justice shall fall on anyone who threatens the prosperity of Neoplus! This is why I am holding the Great Spelunking!"

Notices about the Great Spelunking were plastered all over the city. Everyone was on board with the governor's plan.

"A hundred thousand nuko per Varmint defeated! A million nuko for whoever discovers Star Citadel's hideout! Ten million nuko for the person who takes down Yusei or Tremolo! And if anyone happens to find a sphere that glows like a star, report it to the authorities straightaway! That will net you a million nuko!"

The mercenaries' eyes gleamed.

I could tell they cared only about the money.

The audience's excitement rose. Governor Sandberry raised her index finger swiftly and bravely declared to the money-grubbers, "Now let's show them what for! You have permission from the governor herself to let loose and chase loot in Star Cave!"

"HAAAAAIIIIILLLLL!!"

"Sandberry!! Sandberry!! Sandberry!!"

The hype raised the temperature by about ten degrees.

They remind me of the Seventh Unit.

I guess all berserkers are the same no matter what world you're in… While I was lost in unproductive thought, Spica took a step forward next to me.

"Fuyao did it! The mercenaries are all fired up now!"

"A little too fired up, don't you think…? Going off personal experience, I think those guys are just gonna mow down everything in their path…"

"You don't get it, Terakomari! That's the point!"

"Uhhh…" Lingzi cringed. Spica took one of her beloved lollipops out of her pocket and put it in her mouth before continuing.

"We're finally ready to destroy Star Citadel! Let's go, Terakomari! Time to kick back and make some heads roll!"

"No, thank yo— Wah! Don't pull my hair!"

Spica dragged me out into the plaza.

☆

This whole thing just went to show how amazing Spica La Gemini was at putting her words into action.

It was all thanks to the Great Spelunking, her brilliant plan to use the mercenaries of Neoplus to attack Star Cave.

By seizing the assets and authority of Governor Sandberry (whose real name was Nefty Strawberry, a member of Star Citadel), she had forced Star Citadel into checkmate with blistering speed.

If I were Tremolo, I'd be crying right now.

Who wouldn't, knowing all these freaks were after your life?

"Good job, Fuyao! Now let's blend in with the mercenaries and go to Star Cave!"

"Yeah."

Poof!! In a puff of smoke, Governor Sandberry was replaced by the foxgirl. Fuyao stretched her neck languidly.

"Acting is so tiring. This is supposed to be the 'tail's' job…"

"But it's thanks to you that Neoplus is ours! You're our MVP! Don't you think so, Terakomari?!"

"Huh? Yeah…"

Fuyao looked away.

I hadn't had a real conversation with her since what happened in the hotel.

She thought my mom was the villain who'd destroyed her hometown. But when I asked Amatsu about it, he said she didn't do anything like that.

This was just an unfortunate misunderstanding. I kept trying to speak with her about it, figuring I had to look into things, but she was too grumpy to give me the time of day.

I couldn't even coax her into talking with inari sushi.

One time, I'd even worked up the courage to try to grab her by the tail in an attempt to get her attention. But just before I could, she slashed out with her katana, cutting a tree behind me in half and making Spica burst into laughter. That took, like, fifty years off

my lifespan.

And so time went by… Now it was the day of the Great Spelunking.

"What's up, Terakomari?! Speak clearly! Did you two get into an argument or something?!"

"No, that's not it…"

"Of course, I should've known better! What's a little argument after you two have already fought to death?!"

"No, no, we…"

"But you gotta be good today. It's the final battle. Oh, look, they already opened the entrance!" Spica pointed at Star Cave.

The government workers let the mercenaries through the hole.

At long last, it was time to fight Star Citadel.

I gotta go to the bathroom first… Then Fuyao put on a serious face.

"Your Highness… This is just a hunch, but…"

"What is it? You wanna kill Terakomari?"

"No. I have a bad feeling about this."

"You do? Are you sure it's not just your imagination?"

"…Might be."

"Hmm." Spica crossed her arms. The lollipop stick jutting out of her mouth spun around. "Okay, let's be careful. You gotta trust a beast-folk's intuition." She gave a surprisingly serious answer.

Do they realize they're raising their own death flags right now?

I had to be extra careful not to die myself.

"Um, Komari," Lingzi said timidly. "The rules say you need a guild card to join the Great Spelunking, but are you a registered mercenary…?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah, I am. Actually…are you and Spica registered?"

"'Course!" Spica took her card out with a grin.

Lingzi showed me hers, embarrassed.

I furrowed my brow. I saw an unbelievable string of words.

MERCENARY GROUP: SPICA CLUB.

"Whaddaya think?! A pretty smart and stylish name, isn't it?!"

"You ripped mine off?"

"…? I came up with it myself."

"A coincidence, huh? My team is called the Komari Club, actually. Guess you and that sicko maid have the same tastes."

"……"

Spica's smile froze, resembling one in a painting.

That's unusual…

Then *CRACK!!* She snapped her card in two.

"Whoooa?! What are you doing?!"

"Nice taste, Villhaze! Now I wanna kill you!"

"How does that even make sense?! And now you can't go into Star Cave!"

"I can just use the governor's authority to get in!"

"…Stop yelling. Let's go." Fuyao walked away.

"Slaughter! Slaughter! ♪" Spica sang as she followed behind her.

I could not be more apprehensive of my future. I wanted to run away already.

"Oh, right." Just then Lingzi looked through her bag. She took out a bottle and gave it to me. "Use this if you're in trouble, Komari."

"Is this…blood?"

"Yes. My blood…"

Crimson liquid sloshed inside the bottle.

Hey, I can use my superpowers whenever with this.

How considerate of her. I think every home should have at least one Lingzi. No, but wait. This means…

"D-didn't it hurt? Taking all this blood out?"

"It's okay. I did it for you."

"Lingzi…!"

Then I noticed she had bandages over her fingertips.

I was overcome with emotion. I could no longer say I was afraid or I wanted to go home. I had to live up to her expectations.

"Thank you! You're so reliable…!"

"O-oh, please. I only wanted to be of some help… Let's do our best together." A delicate smile came to Lingzi's face.

I put the bottle in my backpack, grabbed her hand, and walked forward.

I threw myself into the lines of mercenaries to try to catch up to

Spica. That's when…

Cloing.

"?"

…I heard the sound of a musical instrument.

I looked all around, but I could only see clusters of enthusiastic mercenaries. There didn't seem to be a source for what I'd just heard.

"What's wrong, Komari?"

"…Nothing."

My nerves must be making me hear things.

I gave myself a gentle slap and turned to the entrance of Star Cave.

☆

Star Cave was like a labyrinth. Step off the main path, and your chances of getting lost and dying instantly shot up.

Arrows showed the way to the exit, but the signage was hard to update because the incessant excavations made the paths grow more and more complex by the day.

Apparently, there were dozens of disappearances every year, and the government urged everyone to memorize the path they took inside.

"…Um, I already don't know how to get back," I said.

"Really? Maybe you'll get lost and die!" said Spica.

"Nooo! I don't wanna die!"

"D-don't worry, Komari! I still remember!"

Lingzi cheered me up, map in hand. A far cry from Spica's devious abuse of authority.

The Spica Club was exploring Star Cave in a group of fifty.

The underground labyrinth was drenched in greed, sadness, and purple light.

We didn't follow the same route as the last time; instead, we

went through a series of narrow paths not even the miners usually frequented.

However, we weren't walking at random; we were following the route the Nightsky Ring was showing us.

That meant…there was a high chance we'd run into Star Citadel.

"Komari, did something happen between you and Fuyao?" Lingzi poked my shoulder.

Fuyao was in the lead, the usual sour look adorning her face.

"…We just had a little misunderstanding. She's avoiding me."

"I see… I also tried giving her some inari sushi just now, and she threw it away. I think she's in a bad mood."

It astounded me to hear she had shown no reaction to her favorite food.

And how shameless of her to let the food Lingzi had bought go to waste!

"Hey, Spica, has Fuyao always been like that?" I asked.

"No. She used to be quite talkative, no matter the personality."

Spica was licking a blood lollipop like always. At this point, I had nothing but respect for her ability to always act like she was out on a picnic, even in a situation such as this.

"Fuyao told me about her past. You took her in?"

"Yeah, she seemed like she had nowhere to go after her hometown was destroyed. So I saved her! Exactly what a member of the Church should do, right? Not that I belong to it anymore!"

"Her hometown… Was it—?"

"She says Yulinne Gandesblood did it."

"Huh?" Lingzi raised her head.

I winced as I listened to Spica.

"Fuyao is the only survivor of the attack, so no one knows the truth. But Yulinne Gandesblood committed all sorts of atrocities in the Dark Core Zone as one of the Seven Crimson Lords. Granted, her actions were within the limits of sports-war… But in any case, her name was known throughout all six nations, and many people feared her. Just mentioning the name Yulinne would make the Royal Army of Lapelico too scared to eat anything, even their prized bananas. Considering her violent past, I don't think it's a stretch she would

wreck Fuyao's hometown."

"Mom wouldn't do that!" I shouted.

"Shut up, kid!" a mercenary yelled back.

I jumped and hid behind Lingzi while Spica gave me an amused look.

"That is one opinion! But Fuyao doesn't agree. The tragedy of her past keeps her tied down."

Fuyao was probably listening—her tail was swaying in irritation.

"She wants to be the strongest in the world and, in so doing, achieve a peace no one can threaten. And she's serious about creating a world where everybody can die when they want to die—when they can have a meaningful death."

"That…sounds good?"

"It's a pipe dream! But dreams make people stronger! All the Lunae, me included, have a pipe dream of our own that we'll protect to the end."

Even terrorists had their own principles… This was something I'd learned by spending time with Inverse Moon. That didn't justify their violent deeds, but if we were able to respectfully delve into their backgrounds, perhaps we could find a different world.

…Am I getting caught up in sympathy for them?

That's not good. Think clearly, Terakomari Gandesblood.

This isn't like it was with Sakuna or Millicent.

The Lunae are murderers who don't think like us.

They weren't forced to do anything. They do what they do under their own convictions. That means there's no possibility of them redeeming themselves or, like Millicent, of them leaving the group.

But even so…

No, I don't get it.

This is too difficult.

"Anyway, no sign of any Varmints, huh?" Spica remarked in a carefree manner.

There really was no trace of them. I had been sure they would attack the moment we entered the cave, too. Were they afraid of the sheer number of mercenaries?

"I hope they don't show up."

"They have to. I'm sure they're Star Citadel's defense system."

"Could it be they're waiting for the right moment to strike…?" Lingzi said.

"Who knows! But it does feel like the calm before the storm! Now I'm getting a bad feeling about this, just like Fuyao sai—"

"Look! Minerals!" someone shouted.

The next thing I knew, the space ahead opened up.

It was another one of those mining areas. There were axes and carts all around the ample cavern.

And right before our eyes was a mountain of Mandala minerals. Just a ridiculous amount of them.

Even I gasped in awe at the blinding purple light, even though I had no interest in gems.

The mercenaries lost their composure in the presence of the treasure.

"Get your jaws off the ground and start gathering!"

"Did someone leave after mining all that? Whatever, this is a huge find!"

"Hold on—shouldn't we look for Star Citadel's hideout first?"

"Don't be stupid! The governor already gave us permission to mine!"

"Yahoo! You rarely see loot of such high purity!"

All the mercenaries approached the mountain of minerals.

They really were a greedy bunch. Esther would be fuming right about now, yelling at them to get back to work.

The next moment, I sensed someone move behind my back.

I turned around and saw three people in black robes dash back the way we'd come.

What's up with them? It's as if they're running away from some…

Then the person in the front looked over at us and smirked.

I was flabbergasted. I knew that face.

She's…the woman who beat me up at the restroom… Black Scorpion.

"Fuyao, stop the mercenaries," Spica said in chilling voice.

Her eyes were not on Black Scorpion behind us, but on the mercenaries flocking to the Mandala minerals.

Fuyao furrowed her brow.

"Stop them…? I know it's annoying, but we shouldn't cause conflict."

"You don't get it? Do you not feel that flow of strange energy?"

Lingzi gasped and grabbed my arm.

"Mana…! There's magic at work…!"

I couldn't tell. I was incapable of using even elementary-level magic. If I wanted to light a fire, I had to use a Magic Stone or flint.

Wait. A Magic Stone…?

"Fill your bags with everything you can! Don't let anyone else know!"

The mercenaries gathered like moths to a flame.

They all scrambled to get their own share at the same time, causing a small landslide.

The minerals on the exterior of the pile slid down, revealing the other stones hidden behind the purple.

"…Whoa, what's this? It's not Mandala on the inside!"

"That's a weird pattern…"

Magic Stones.

High-quality processed rocks that were imbued with magic in the Foreworld for use in war. Since there was no mana in the Netherworld, I'd assumed they didn't exist here…

Then I came to a frightening realization. I knew those Magic Stones. The Imperial Army used them to blow away their enemies.

Those rocks were imbued with explosion magic.

"Komari! We have to stop them…!" Lingzi shouted.

"It's too late! They're already activated!" Spica replied.

"Wha…?!" The mercenaries looked down at the Magic Stones curiously.

There was no stopping it. Even I could feel the giant wave of mana now.

Lingzi screamed and hunkered down. Fuyao raised her katana and twirled it. Spica's eyes glowed scarlet.

The mountain of Magic Stones blew up.

☆

With a thunderous boom, Star Cave began to collapse.

It was all the consequence of a single girl's wicked idea: turning to dust the mountain of treasure that gave Neoplus its identity.

The impact shook the land.

The entrance to Star Cave crumbled, spewing out a wave of dust that blew back the mercenaries who were in the plaza waiting to get inside.

The collapse caused a chain reaction that made the land sink all across Neoplus.

The citizens could do nothing.

Some were crushed by the rubble, while others fell into fissures that formed in the earth.

The fortress that Star Citadel had worked so hard to build crumbled like a sandcastle exposed to the ocean's waves.

"Holy… I didn't know the Magic Stones were this powerful…" Nefty watched the disaster unfold with a smile on her face.

The Magic Stones were stored in Star Cave.

Nerzanpi had gotten them delivered in case of an emergency.

When Yusei had proposed annihilating Inverse Moon and the mercenaries by blowing them up, Nefty hadn't been expecting a blast of this scale. Surely not even the Wicked God Slayer nor the slaughter commander could survive this.

Still, they had paid a huge price in exchange.

Star Cave was the very foundation of Star Citadel.

It was obvious the economy of Neoplus would collapse with all this destruction, and without the Mandala mines, they would be in a pinch for money sooner rather than later. The scandal would likely force the governor to resign.

And, um, is Tremolo still alive?

Yusei had said the bard would be fine, as she was very deep underground…

Not to mention, what if the blast affected the *treasure* in Star

Cave, too?

"Um… Yusei, is this okay??" Nefty dropped her gaze to the bunny plushie in her arms.

After a while, the willpower shook in response.

"R-really?! Thank goodness! She's okay… No, no, not that I was worried about her! Anyway, what should I do now?"

Her next order came right away.

Yusei was intent on ending Spica and Terakomari here.

Nefty had to help. Although she wasn't sure she could do much without her coffins.

"Okay." She nodded and left the shadow of the building, running toward Star Cave.

First things first, she had to see their corpses.

This was their punishment for stealing everything from her. There would be no reincarnation for them… Nefty felt so happy, she could die.

☆

"AAAH?! STAR CAVE BLEW UP?!"

Lonne Cornelius screamed from the rooftop of a rich person's mansion in the best district of Neoplus, which had barely escaped collapse.

Below her, the city was in shambles.

The most significant damage was by Star Cave's entrance, in about a sixteen-hundred-foot radius around Neoplus's center. The ground was lined with cracks, and the buildings were sunken in. Fires were breaking out everywhere, and people ran in panic every which way.

"Shoot, now I can't get the Mandala minerals! I was gonna sneak in later…!"

"You want to get arrested again?" Amatsu sighed beside her.

He had gotten her out of jail.

Besides Spica, she knew Amatsu the longest out of everyone in Inverse Moon; although he usually bullied her in the stupidest ways, he was reliable when worse came to worst, like now.

"I'm not afraid of the police! I need those minerals!"

"Forget the minerals. Her Highness and Terakomari are supposed to be in Star Cave right now."

"Ah…"

He had told her that Spica was using the Great Spelunking to investigate Star Citadel's hideout. But after this explosion, that wouldn't matter anymore.

"Amatsu! Cornelius! What are you doing there?!"

They heard a voice come from below.

White-haired Tryphon Cross glared daggers at them.

Amatsu, Tryphon, and Cornelius—the backstage team—had been ordered to look for the escaped governor. Clearly, the only one to blame was Tryphon, as he had been in charge of guarding the cell, but the other two had wound up getting dragged into it, too.

"Her Highness is in danger. We need to get to Star Cave ASAP."

"Should we ignore her orders?" Amatsu said. "Spica told us not to follow her until we caught Sandberry. We could be in more trouble if we let the governor go—"

Thud!! Rubble rained down, scraping Cornelius's cheek. She'd been hit by Treason's Spirit Gate.

What? Why am I under attack? A cold sweat ran down her back.

"Oops," the Sapphire man said with real disappointment. "I missed. I was trying to hit Amatsu's head."

"Be more careful! What if I died just now?!"

"Whatever. Do you think any good will come out of us going to Star Cave now? Her Highness might be dead and dismembered already."

"So you say, but I can tell you're uneasy, Amatsu."

Cornelius looked at Amatsu in surprise.

Sure enough, there was an unusual, faint shadow of anxiety on his face.

"Foolish," Tryphon groaned. "Keep sitting on the sidelines, and you are bound to lose something dear. Only those who act with

fervor can obtain glory."

"…" Amatsu pondered that for a moment. "I must admit you're right this time."

"Let's go, then. For the glory of Inverse Moon."

And so they decided to head to Star Cave.

Yet Cornelius couldn't shake her anxiety entirely.

Something had been bugging her about Neoplus ever since they'd arrived—the city was abnormally glum.

It was far too ominous a place. Perhaps it was a result of the stagnant willpower of sadness…

"…It's foul. Far more than Her Highness's willpower."

Cornelius scratched her chest.

There a stellagmata—the mark of etiolation—surfaced.

☆

Plop, plop, plop.

The echoes of waterdrops hitting the ground.

The cold air and retching smell of dust.

I slowly opened my eyes.

Sharp pain coursed through my joints the moment I tried moving my limbs.

But it didn't seem like I was dying. Thank goodness.

I staggered to my feet and fearfully checked my surroundings.

Dense purple light as far as the eye could see.

I could touch the ceiling by just raising my short arms above my head.

Was that an underground stream leaking through the rocks?

Just then everything clicked.

Star Cave had collapsed, and I was trapped deep underground.

Fear seized my body.

I was surrounded by rocks on all sides.

I tried punching my way through, but I only hurt my hand.

I hadn't the slightest idea of how to get back to the surface. *Am I gonna starve to death here? I've got lunch in my backpack, but that's only one meal.*

Wait, what about everyone else?

The Magic Stone explosion had literally split the earth.

By some miracle, I had survived, but there was no guarantee Lingzi, Spica, and Fuyao were quite so lucky.

Then I heard a groan. Someone lay limply on the ground, outside the reach of the light.

A pair of ears and a tail. The beast-folk was bleeding from her head and panting in pain.

"Fuyao!"

I ran to her, taking out the bandages Cornelius had given me, and awkwardly tried to patch her up.

"Uh… Tera…komari…?"

"Y-you okay?! Can you hear me?!"

"Yeah…"

She was conscious.

I sighed in relief upon learning she was alive.

☆

"…You have my thanks."

"I'm just happy you're okay."

Fuyao and I sat on a pile of rubble in the middle of the purple glow.

Her wounds weren't serious, and she stopped bleeding right away. In no time flat, she was back on her feet and moving; that sulky look of hers had returned, too.

It was just the two of us trapped here. I had no idea where or how the others were.

"Fudge… What even happened? I hope the others are okay…"

"Her Highness and Lingzi Ailan should be fine," Fuyao said,

holding her head. "We're still standing because Her Highness mitigated the power of the explosion."

"She can do that…?"

"Apparently, she has the power to influence the flow of things… Point is, there's no way the two of them would die after she used her powers."

I didn't quite understand, but I decided to believe her. Imagining the worst wasn't good for my mental health.

"Let's talk about what we'll do now…" Fuyao took a sip of water from her flask and rose to her feet with some effort. "We're in the middle of a cave-in. I imagine pretty deep in Star Cave."

"How did this happen…?"

"Obviously, Star Citadel did it. Probably the escaped governor—Nefty Strawberry."

For real? I thought we were winning.

"Tsk." Fuyao clicked her tongue. "It's all Tryphon's fault for letting her escape."

"Well, we still aren't sure that's what happened… Let's just look for a way out of here."

I looked all around.

"Can you cut through the walls with your katana?"

"No. And even if I could, the rocks in this space must be quite delicately balanced. Breaking one spot could cause an even bigger breakdown."

So does that mean I can't use my Core Implosion to force our way outside, either?

Not that I'm sure I could do that to begin with.

"Th-then what do we do? Are we gonna starve to death here…?!"

"Don't be stupid. Look."

I followed Fuyao's gaze to the base of the wall behind me.

There was a cat-size hole there, through which a breeze tickled my feet.

This spot could be connected to the outside.

I got on the ground and peered through the hole.

"…I don't think we can go through here. We'll probably get stuck."

"No. Go."

"I'm telling you, we— Ow! Hey, don't kick my butt!"

Fuyao forced me through.

The roughness of the rocks hurt, but I had no other choice. No going back now. Enduring the pain, I desperately crawled my way through the tight space, until my view opened up.

I'd reached the other side: a spacious tunnel. Most likely a secret passage the mercenaries had dug.

"A-all right! We made it out. Huh?"

I noticed something was wrong.

My butt was caught in the hole.

I struggled hard, but it only made me hurt.

I felt tears well in my eyes.

Oh no… This I couldn't predict. Am I gonna starve to death in a hole?

"Fuyao, help… I'm stuck."

"Get out of the way already."

"Huh? Whoooa?!"

I felt my butt being grabbed. Then brutally pushed.

It was as painful as it was embarrassing. My mind went blank as the violent kneading on my buttocks led me to my certain doom.

Nyoop! I was shoved out of the hole.

"Gweh!" I rolled and slammed face-first into the ground.

Ouch. Why did she have to be so violent? I'd be dead right now if I were a frail old lady… While I grumbled silently, I watched Fuyao gracefully slip through the hole.

Tap! She landed like a ballerina.

"…How come you didn't get stuck when you're bigger than me?"

"I dislocated my joints."

You wha…?

Fuyao audibly fixed her joints back into place while looking around.

"There's an arrow showing the way back. But the road's blocked. Looks like we have no choice but to go deeper in."

I dusted off my clothes.

"But that way's definitely blocked at the end, isn't it?"

"Only one way to find out."

I mean, yeah, but… I guess we have no alternative.

I hurried behind her.

"Do you think the Dark Core and Star Citadel's hideout are this way?"

"…"

"Fuyao? What's up?"

"…Nothing."

She seemed wary of our surroundings.

Her fox ears were standing in alert. Perhaps even the literal old fox of a terrorist got distressed when buried alive.

☆

"…Hey, about what we talked about the other day," I said, feeling like I was touching a cactus.

Star Cave was so dark and quiet, I felt as if my fear would crush me if I didn't talk.

"I said some things without knowing what you've been through. It was inconsiderate of me. Sorry."

"…"

Maybe I should've talked about something else.

An oppressive feeling was oozing from Fuyao, one that could have squashed a bug.

I should've brought up the weather instead… Not that we can tell what it's like now.

"…I got offended on my own. It's not your fault," she responded with surprising gentleness. "It's obvious you wouldn't know about my situation, because I never told you about it. You don't have to apologize, and you bringing it up again annoys me more."

"But we can't work together if we don't clear this up." I trotted up to her side and looked at her. "I know you find it annoying, but I gotta ask: What happened between you and my mom? You don't

have to answer if you really don't want to…"

"Exactly what I told you at the hotel." She sighed and stared straight ahead. "I'll tell you as thanks for healing me, but it's not a pleasant tale. One day, Yulinne Gandesblood showed up out of nowhere and burned my hometown of Lunar Village to the ground."

"She burned it down…? Why would she do that?"

"You should know. She was a Crimson Lord indulging in massacre in the Dark Core Zone. She has the nerve to destroy a village without batting an eye. And that's exactly what happened. I was the only survivor."

"Just you…?" I found that weird. "What about the Dark Core? Did she use a Divine Instrument?"

"It's possible, but Lunar Village was so far off in the countryside, we didn't know about the Dark Core. None of the villagers would've survived, even if she used a regular weapon on them."

"Hmm? That sort of thing happens?"

"Yes. I didn't know about the Dark Core when I was a kid. It can't be that weird for a village or two outside its influence to exist."

I felt as though something didn't fit, like when you button your shirt off by one hole.

"When was this?"

"Years ago."

"More precise, please."

"…Like, eight years ago."

It was before my mom disappeared.

"Enough already." Fuyao sighed. "If you don't want to believe me, then don't, but I'll stick to what I believe, too. I will take revenge on Yulinne Gandesblood. No more explanation."

"Wait, I still want to know…"

Fuyao came to a halt.

I stopped, too, wondering what was up, only to notice her eyes were bright with hostility. She even reached for the katana at her side.

"S-sorry! Let's talk about something else! So about cacti; I like the round ones. Do you have any favorites?"

"Quiet. The enemy's coming."

"Wha…?"

I looked ahead in reaction, and at that same moment, an "Eep" escaped my lips.

Black beasts like shadows—Varmints.

They were smaller than the one we'd encountered previously, but there were a lot of them. About fourteen.

They all glared at us like genuine carnivorous predators.

"Fuyao! Let's run!"

Fwoosh! The black shadows jumped every which way.

One of them leaped at us, but Fuyao sliced it in half with her sword.

The rest of the Varmints watched carefully after witnessing their fellow's death, but soon, they howled and attacked all at once.

Fuyao smirked and stomped on the Mandala mineral fragments on the ground.

"Are you ready to die now?" she asked, righteous and carefree.

I hid behind a rock. I didn't want to get hurt, and it was obvious I'd only be in the way.

☆

I had gotten separated from Terakomari and Fuyao.

I'd tried to hold back the blast, but the cave-in was inevitable.

The landslide swept away and buried the greedy mercenaries in a flood. Almost everyone had to be dead, including the Black Scorpion gang, who'd set off the Magic Stones.

This had to be Star Citadel's doing.

I had been careless. They still had something up their sleeve.

They were trying to murder me, Terakomari, and the mercenaries.

"Too bad I'm still alive!"

I took a lollipop out of my pocket and stretched before looking around.

The air was heavy; I had to be pretty far down.

The cave itself looked the same, bathed in purple light like usual.

But through gaps in the rocks, I could see glimpses of the pillars of a large building.

I walked ahead, careful of my step.

The pillars looked modest, unadorned. They were thicker than those in the Mulnite Palace, and quite numerous.

It appeared there was a huge temple (?) hidden deep within Star Cave.

"Is this Star Citadel's headquarters…?"

It was quite shabby if so.

They'd lost control of Black Scorpion and their Magic Stones and had gotten their own hideout buried as a result. Or could it be they were so desperate, they were willing to accept the sacrifice to blow us up?

Just then I felt a surge of odd energy.

Magic? No, willpower?

It felt like something went in and out of the temple.

"S-Spica!"

I heard the restless voice of Lingzi Ailan. I had tried to ignore her the whole time she fidgeted behind my back, but it was time to give the poor thing some attention.

"Um, where are we…?"

"Lingzi! Looks like your arms and legs are still straight and in place! Good to know!"

"Y-yes. Good to see you well, too." Lingzi smiled innocently.

She seemed to trust people after just spending some time with them, the fool. But that simplemindedness was adorable.

"Do you think the others are okay…?"

"They're fine! I can tell from my Core Implosion! It's a shame we were split up, but we'll meet up again soon!"

"Really…? Thank goodness…"

That was a lie. My Core Implosion was not that convenient.

I didn't think they were dead, but I couldn't show any uncertainty, lest this girl start screaming and crying. Making effective use of lies was the secret to a smart life.

"But…we're so deep underground. Will we be able to get back?"

"Let's turn that anxiety into action! Can you walk? Any sprains?"

"I'm okay."

"Okay."

I looked up at the buried temple.

There was a gap between the rocks that could be used as an entrance. A thin person could just barely fit through it.

"Is that…a castle? Maybe Star Citadel's hideout…?"

"That's a possibility! Chaaarge!"

"Huh?! I'm not ready…"

"You gotta be ready to kill at any time! Don't dawdle, or you'll grow old before achieving anything!"

"Awww… Komari…"

I pulled Lingzi by the arm and slipped with her through the gap.

It was a gamble. If this was Star Citadel's headquarters, then Tremolo Parcostella and Yusei could be here.

☆

There were actually more than fourteen Varmints.

Black beasts appeared from every shadow in the tunnel and bared their fangs at us relentlessly.

"Sly bastards."

Fuyao swung her katana—the Null Night Blade, if I recalled correctly—with imperceptible speed and crushed the Varmints one after the other. Meanwhile, I could only peek at the otherworldly battle from behind a rock.

One step out there, and I would die.

I wished I could help Fuyao, but I had only the one vial of Lingzi's blood, and I wasn't sure this was the moment to drink it. All I could do was scream to distract the beasts…

Splat!!

A Varmint corpse plopped at my feet. It melted into sticky liquid

until only the Mandala mineral—its core—remained.

What the heck are these creatures?

Are they man-made after all?

"Terakomari! One's coming for you!"

"Huh? Whoooa?!"

A beast growled as it charged at me.

I howled myself as I twisted to dodge the deadly tackle.

The Varmint crashed into a rock, then swiftly ricocheted right back at me.

"S-STAY AWAYYYYYY!! Gweh!"

I tripped.

This was what happened when you tried moving a lot all of a sudden without being in shape.

The vial of blood flew out of my pocket and rolled on the rocky ground.

It was out of my reach, and even if I could grab it, I didn't have the time to drink it.

So this is how it ends. Mauled by the jaws of a beast.

Sbah! I heard the sound of meat being sliced right as I began bracing myself for death.

Fuyao cleanly slashed through the Varmint's body with her Null Night Blade.

"Stop giving me more work!"

It wasn't a happy ending yet, though.

While Fuyao kept swinging her blade, another Varmint ran behind her, aiming its jaws for her neck.

"Fuyao, behind you!!"

"!" She turned her head, but then she staggered as though she was dizzy.

I remembered she was hurt. She may have been a cold-blooded terrorist, but she was still a flesh-and-blood person, just like me.

That was to say, her reaction was too slow.

I jumped without thinking.

She had saved me. I had to save her. But not even that logic crossed my mind in that moment. I simply wanted to save the person who was in danger right before my eyes.

"Wai—!"

The black beast reached her.

Then its sharp fangs sank into my shoulder.

☆

A few minutes later…

Mandala mineral fragments were scattered all around the tunnel.

They were all Varmint cores. Fuyao had shattered every last one.

No new ones seemed to be popping up. Star Cave was silent and still. No more attacks at the moment. But…

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! Be more careful!"

"The pain will teach you not to run into the jaws of death." Fuyao sighed as she anointed my shoulder.

The medicine stung…and just its application wouldn't heal me right away.

The experience made me painfully aware of how ridiculous the Dark Core was.

"…We'll put on some bandages, and it should be okay. It's what I've done since forever. And you being a vampire, it won't be long until you're fully recovered."

"Mmm… Thanks."

I'd taken the hit for Fuyao. The Varmint had bitten my shoulder, leaving a wound that hurt so bad I'd thought I was gonna die this time for sure. However, it turned out that human bodies were more resilient than I thought, and the wound wasn't fatal.

By the way, Fuyao had immediately recovered and dealt with the Varmints. Maybe she hadn't even needed me to cover her.

"…Why did you shield me?" Fuyao asked while putting away the healing equipment. "You could've left me alone. There was no need for you to get hurt."

"My body just moved on its own. You'd want to help someone in danger in front of you, too, right?"

She stared at me as if I were an animal from an extinct species.

Fuyao looked away. "Yeah," she muttered. "…But don't you resent me? One day, you'll regret putting yourself in harm's way for a terrorist. If you're not already regretting it."

"Hey, you don't know how I feel. I don't regret it a bit."

"Yeah, right. I tried to kill you and your friend Karla Amatsu."

"Stop being a contrarian. And overthinking stuff." I put on my military coat and picked up the vial of blood. "You might be a villain who hurt my friend, but you're also a hero who saved my life. Don't bring friend and foe or good and evil into this. I just sincerely didn't want you to get hurt."

"…"

When I saw Fuyao's scars at the hotel, it had been gut-wrenching. I honestly would have felt badly if she got any more.

Fuyao wagged her tail in silence for a while before standing up and turning around to face me.

"…Okay, I get it."

"What?"

"I get that you're a humongous softy and an irreparable weirdo."

"H-hey! I'll have you know I'm the only rational person in this world."

"So you're not weird, but the rest of the world is? Do you realize how that sounds? Anyway, now I feel as though I understand why so many people gather around you."

The mood softened. Fuyao's terroristic aura faded.

I looked at her in surprise, and she curtly averted her gaze.

She wouldn't look me in the eye. Yet she reached out her hand, falteringly but still swiftly, as though trying to force the awkward mood away.

"…Can you stand up? If so, let's move on."

I could.

I grabbed Fuyao's hand and nodded before standing up.

☆

No more enemies appeared for a while after that.

Fuyao and I walked side by side through the purple tunnel.

We came across a few roadblocks, but they all had gaps big enough for us to crawl through.

Although we were somehow making our way forward, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

It wasn't hard to imagine that we'd come to a real dead end.

We had limited food and water, not to mention stamina.

We had to find a way out of here, or we'd end up as mummies.

"…Fuyao, can I drink Lingzi's blood? I feel like we'll find a hint for our way out if I use my Core Implosion."

"Save it for a fight. Tremolo Parcostella or Yusei could be waiting up ahead."

"Mmm… But…"

She did have a point. It was better to wait until we had no other choice.

"Then how about your blood…?"

"……Leave that as a last resort, too."

I stole a few glances to observe her. She seemed softer than before. She was even wagging her tail.

I had no idea what was going through her mind, but at the very least, she didn't seem to be annoyed by me being next to her.

What do I do now? Some small talk?

There's a lot I want to ask about her past, but…

"Light…"

Maybe I could start by asking something safer, like, "Do you like kitsune udon?" But just before I could open my mouth to ask that, Fuyao halted, her eyes opening wide.

"I see light. And not from the Mandala minerals."

"Huh? Ah… You're right! That's sunlight!"

Beyond the tunnel, the purple light of the cave was replaced by the orange glow of the sun.

That had to be the exit.

There was a circle cut right in the dark.

It was already dusk. The vegetation beyond the exit was dyed in the blood-red color of evening.

"Hurray! C'mon, Fuyao!"

I forgot all about the pain in my shoulder and ran.

My hair fluttered in the refreshing wind.

I was still worried about Lingzi and Spica, but first we had to leave Star Cave and regroup. I sprinted in excitement to get my first breath of fresh air in hours, but then…

"Wha…?"

Beyond the exit was not Neoplus.

It was a garden in a pit, surrounded by cliffs so tall, I couldn't see where they ended.

Now that I thought about it, this was no surprise.

Star Cave was a giant underground labyrinth, and we had been going down all this time. Even if we left the cave, that didn't mean we'd be on the surface. It should be impossible, actually.

Then I saw something bizarre.

There were buildings in the pit. Not cabins for mercenaries to rest in, like I'd thought at first, but thatch-roofed houses.

Then I noticed there was also a well and even dried-up farm fields.

I couldn't sense anyone else's presence, though.

…Huh? What's the deal with this place?

Well, it's none of my business. We gotta find an exit.

I turned around and touched the rocky wall.

"Do we have to climb this thing…? I can't do that…"

I had never gone rock climbing.

If Lingzi were here, she could've flown us up…

No, you've got this. I can use all sorts of magic with my Core Implosion. Surely I can fly, too.

"Fuyao! Give me some of your blo—"

She was still standing by the entrance, her expression dyed in shock, like a human who had been turned into a fox.

She stared at an old sign left behind in the wasteland.

I ran up to her with a furrowed brow and popped my head around her side to read the sign.

"'Lunar Village'… Wait a second. Wasn't that…?"

"No. This can't be possible. This can't be Lunar Village."

Startled, I looked up at her face.

She was pale. Her expression was drenched in a fear I could have never imagined seeing on her.

A tepid wind blew, and then I heard a noise that turned the world on its head.

Cloing.

"No. This is Lunar Village."

I looked at the center of the abandoned village in shock at the sound of that familiar voice.

It was the biwa bard, clothed in fluttery vestment and her eyes covered by a blindfold with a strange design; I still didn't know if she was blind or not. The string instrument on her back was the source of her moniker—the biwa bard—and the source of the eerie *cloing, cloing* melody that played with her every battle.

The murderer from Star Citadel, Tremolo "Dead Maestro" Parcostella, put her hands in her pockets; an ominous smile etched itself on her face.

"I-it's you! So this really is Star Citadel's hideout!"

"Yes. Well, Neoplus itself is Star Citadel's fortress to begin with. But anyway…" Tremolo placed her hand on her cheek in concern. "It appears a lot happened while I was underground. You took over the government office, made the mercenaries invade Star Cave, and were hit by an explosion from our priceless Magic Stones… I'm baffled by Nefty's folly."

There was a whole earthquake happening in my knees.

I was up against a professional killer. The same one who'd nearly taken my life once before. Strings could already be set up all over. My head could come flying off at any moment. Fear coursed through my whole body and paralyzed my brain.

Still, I gathered the little courage I had and wrung my voice out of my throat.

"Surrendering is futile! Resist now!"

Tremolo giggled.

"Sounds like you're nervous. How cute."

"Ah! N-no, that wasn't it! Resistance is futile! Surrender now!"

"I understand. You became the hunted the moment you set foot in here."

"You're on a hunt?! So you really have traps set already!"

"Who knows. You'll have to find out yourself."

"No, wait! Let's talk first! Nice weather we're having today, eh?!"

"Yes, it's a beautiful evening. Now, let's get to killing."

"W-w-w-wait! What's your favorite food?! I love omelet rice!! By the way, Lingzi likes napa cabbage, and Fuyao loves inari sushi and fried tofu!!"

"Are you trying to buy time? I see, I'll play along with you. There's something I want to tell you, too." Tremolo looked up at the sky and muttered, "Foxgirl."

Fuyao shuddered.

"…What?"

"It's been a while. Eight years back, I thought you would be a toothless kid forever. So this is what they mean when they say time flies."

I looked at Fuyao in shock before turning back to Tremolo.

They know each other…? But they don't seem to be happy about reuniting…

The tension in the air between them was so palpable, it would be impossible to cut.

"Let me repeat: This is Lunar Village. Your hometown, and the stage of tragedy where people died eight years ago. Look at these ruins. You see that one there? Isn't that your old home?"

"That can't be. Lunar Village wasn't in the pit of a valley."

"There was a big earthquake. Most of it was buried in Star Cave."

"I'm telling you, it's impossible! Besides, I was born in the other world! Even if there's another Lunar in the Netherworld, it has nothing to do with me!"

"Lady Nerzanpi said the Lunar Village on the other side is still alive and kicking."

"…!"

I wasn't following.

I didn’t get what could have Fuyao so disturbed, and I didn’t understand why Tremolo had started talking about Lunar Village.

However, one thing I could sense for sure: Fuyao’s heart was turning blacker and blacker.

“The second and first world are *near identical* reflections of each other. That is why there are two Lunar Villages.”

“But… I’m telling you…”

“You’ve realized, haven’t you? The Lunar Village in the other world is fine, and the Lunar Village over here is dead. The destruction you lived through eight years ago took place in this Netherworld settlement. And…”

Cloing.

Her biwa echoed in the cave. Tremolo sneered.

“Yulinne Gandesblood was in the first world eight years ago. Terakomari Gandesblood knows that very well.”

“Shut up…”

“Therefore, Yulinne Gandesblood could not have destroyed the Lunar Village of the Netherworld. Do you understand what this means?”

“I said shut up!”

Fuyao’s anger erupted, and she dashed forward.

Cloing, cloing.

Mandala mineral strings attacked from every direction.

Fuyao swung her Null Night Blade, deftly shearing the threads.

A *ping!* echoed with every cut, harmonizing with the *cloing* of the biwa, creating an eerie caprice.

“Wait, Fuyao!”

Krrak! A thunderous roar.

A tree right next to me was severed from its roots, and its trunk spun as it fell.

A shriek escaped my throat, and I ran for dear life.

The moment I tripped and slid, I heard a *boom!* like a giant’s footstep directly behind me.

Holy macaroni, I’m gonna die just because I’m near them.

But I couldn’t run. I couldn’t leave Fuyao behind.

The foxgirl cut Tremolo’s strings in her rapid approach. She was

already less than thirty feet away from her. She brought back her Null Night Blade with a firm step and…

"Well… Are you ready to die?!"

…jumped.

Cloing.

Tremolo responded with sadness.

"Forgive me. I don't want to die."

"!"

Fuyao faltered.

Her sword slowed in its descent, and Tremolo took the chance to leap away.

Cloing.

Deep-red blood spurted from Fuyao's shoulder.

Fuyao had been stabbed by one of Tremolo's strings. By some miracle, the attack had narrowly missed her heart. *C'mon, stop with the live commentary and do something!*

"F-Fuyao!" I screamed, running for her.

Fuyao clutched her wound and groaned in pain as she fell to one knee.

The dripping blood moistened the dry field.

I got lightheaded at the sight of her bleeding. The wound was tremendous. You couldn't heal that without a Dark Core.

"Are you okay?! Sh-shoot, I think I have some medicine in my backpack, but…"

"No… It's no big deal…" She held back her panic and staggered to her feet.

What're you saying?! No big deal? You're gonna die if we don't do something. Yohann dies from wounds like that all the time… Yet Fuyao glared at Tremolo, a terrifyingly firm resolve in her eyes.

"…That was cowardly. But I was foolish to fall for it. It appears you decided to put your body on the line long ago."

"Of course. But I'll say… You are one bizarre fox. Why ask someone who must die whether they're ready?"

"I want a world where everyone can choose when they die. I doubt someone like you, who takes pleasure in killing, would understand…"

“Is that so? You developed your ideology in response to surviving Lunar Village’s destruction, hmm?”

Something about this situation was putting me on edge. Tremolo was talking too much. As though she was buying time. Anxiety struck my chest.

“People’s convictions are formed from their connections. You wish for no one to go down the tragic path you were thrown onto. How respectable.”

“…Shut up. I’ll tear you to pieces.”

“So you set limitations on killing. Does that mean you’ve never killed anyone who didn’t want to die?”

“Obviously…! I fight to change the world…!”

“Really? Isn’t that pointless?”

An earthquake.

The trees rustled, the ruined houses shook, and the stones on the ground rolled.

It felt like something huge was breaking the very earth.

I looked down at my feet.

It’s coming from down there.

“Fuyao! Let’s retreat! Something’s wrong!”

“Pointless? What do you mean, Tremolo Parcostella?”

“Oh, I was just curious.” Tremolo rested one finger on her mouth and asked, like a mean teacher, “Did you actually see Yulinne Gandesblood kill the people of Lunar Village? Do you really think she was behind it? Can’t you think of any other possibility? Why did you survive, Fuyao Meteorite?”

“__”

Fuyao’s lips slammed shut.

The next moment, a giant quake shook the whole world.

The ground swelled. I couldn’t keep myself standing. The blood-drenched field cracked open, and an arm reached out from the fissure.

A black arm with three fingers.

“Did you know that one of the Netherworld’s Dark Cores is buried under the remains of Lunar Village? The existence of the Mandala minerals is proof enough.”

The arm broke through the rubble as it stretched farther.

It progressively showed more of itself, like a cicada larva crawling to the surface.

"But we haven't found it yet. This place is prone to earthquakes, so it probably sank deeper and deeper underground with the passage of time. No wonder Nefty had trouble finding it… So Yusei got those beasts to help us mine. But their job isn't just excavation. They're also here to get rid of our enemies."

"Wh-what're you even talking about?! Explain what's up with this thing!"

"That is the largest of the Varmints. We call it Rakshasa."

It felt like the ground exploded.

On the other side of the resulting dust cloud, I saw a giant silhouette.

The Varmint we'd come across the other day was nothing in comparison.

This one was as huge as a mountain, and its black skin shone like metal.

It planted its feet firmly on the ground and spread its two bat-like wings on its back.

Its sharp eyes burned with bloodlust as it glared at us.

Basically, it was a huge dragon.

Apparently, the Varmints could take shapes other than that of a dog.

"I can't defeat you two with the Myogo String, as proved back in Lumiere Village. So I'll have this fellow help me."

"You can't be serious! We gotta fight a freaking dragon now?!"

"You like the surprise? It's a replica of an Emperor Mizuchi, which the heroes of the Six Nations used to ride in the past. That said, it is still no different than any other Varmint. You can defeat it by destroying the Mandala mineral on its head."

Tremolo jeered triumphantly.

She must've been running her mouth to buy time for this Rakshasa monster to arrive.

It was humongous. About one hundred times bigger than Bucephalus.

I could not imagine us punching this guy to victory.

"Weh."

It was already too late by the time I heard the slash in the air.

Its giant tail shot like a whip, blowing Fuyao and me away with ease. I did what I could to try to break the fall, but it was hopeless. Fuyao and I tangled into each other and rolled on the ground.

Krrakk!! We slammed into a wall.

I barely managed to keep myself from blacking out.

Everything hurt so much. It was beyond unfair for it to attack like that out of nowhere. I wasn't prepared, and Fuyao was already injured…

"F-Fuyao! You okay?! Eep!" I saw the palm of my hand was drenched in red.

She wouldn't stop bleeding. Crimson gushed from Fuyao's shoulder like a fountain. She would die if I didn't do something. Yet she only stared blankly at the ruins of Lunar as if she were in the middle of a nightmare.

"This can't be… I… No…"

"Stay with me! Here, let's get up!"

"My purpose was to get revenge on Yulinne Gandesblood… To make a world where people could decide when to die… To be so strong that no one could threaten me…"

She wasn't right.

It didn't seem as though she'd lost her mind to the pain. Something else was making her like this.

Then I noticed a black mist leaking from her body.

Is this…willpower?

"Oh my, that is some high-purity sadness." Tremolo put her hands in her pockets and sneered. "I sow the seeds of sadness across the world to gather negative willpower. The sadder people are, the more miasma leaks and accumulates in my biwa. This will become energy to grow Yusei. And your sadness is perfect for it, foxgirl."

"You… What did you do to Fuyao?"

"Hmm? Take a guess."

The miasma drifted in the air toward Tremolo's biwa.

How much sadness had that instrument sucked up?

Then I saw a star mark appear on Fuyao's chest.

"What wonderful energy. It was worth taking my sweet time to cultivate it."

"That's enough! Let's go, Fuyao! We can't waste our time on that girl!"

"Unhand me, Terakomari. I…"

"You seem to misunderstand, foxgirl."

Fuyao was petrified.

She wouldn't move no matter how hard I pulled her. She fell under Tremolo's spell.

"You were born in the Netherworld. And it wasn't Yulinne Gandesblood who destroyed Lunar Village. Do you understand what that means?"

"…"

"You won't kill anyone who isn't ready to die? You want power so nobody will be sad anymore? Magnificent. The more pain this effort causes, the more sadness I can reap. The deaths of everyone in Lunar and your great efforts were only fertilizers to produce the fruit of this sadness."

"You… You? You did it? You killed my family… My brother…"

Cloing.

The sound of the biwa echoed in the cave. Tremolo pulled a string.

"You think? Wasn't it you?"

I was not following.

What did she mean by that?

"I only watched. Fuyao Meteorite, it was none other than you who set fire to this village and wiped out its people."

"N-no…"

"You've never killed anyone who's not ready to die? You betrayed your ideal before it was even created. You erased your memory out of guilt. You wished to become someone else. That's where your childish second-personality act came from, isn't it?"

"That's…absurd!"

Rakshasa howled the moment Fuyao blew up and gripped her katana.

Cloing, cloing. The eerie sound of the biwa accompanied the giant's assault.

Fuyao nearly stood up, but pain brought her to her limits, and she crouched back down.

I was beyond shocked.

The citizens of Lumiere Village weren't the only victims of Star Citadel; they might be irredeemable villains after all. Tremolo had committed the foulest of deeds to constrict Fuyao's heart. If Lunar Village still existed, perhaps Fuyao wouldn't have become a terrorist; she could've led a happy life like any normal girl.

My chest rumbled as I looked down at the foxgirl.

She sat in self-abandonment, either unwilling to fight anymore or incapable of recognizing this as reality.

I couldn't leave her alone.

I couldn't let the Varmint eat us.

And most importantly—I couldn't let Star Citadel keep making people suffer.

"…Tremolo, I'm putting a stop to you here and now."

Rakshasa roared and accelerated.

I took the vial out of my pocket, flicked the cap open, and drank the red liquid without hesitation.

Ba-thump.

Fuyao looked at me in surprise.

My heart beat faster. Rainbow mana gushed.

A rainbow was etched into the evening sky, and a gentle rain fell.

I could feel fate overwrite itself.

Driven by a powerful sense of purpose, I stared directly at the incoming Rakshasa and raised my right hand gracefully.

The next moment, the ground caved in with a thunderous boom.

Deafening screams.

Rakshasa's lower body was immobilized by the sinkhole.

It thrashed and wrestled as much as it could, but to no avail. In fact, it only sank farther.

Then I heard something overhead break. An effect of the shock? Was the cliff already at its breaking point? Either way, a mass of boulders fell from the crumbling edge of the cliff.

Tremolo pulled her strings in a panic.

Some of the rocks split into pebbles, but that was all. It was impossible to break every one of them. The biggest of the boulders dropped like meteorites and hit the struggling Rakshasa on the head.

Clonk. Its Mandala core cracked.

The next moment, jet-black willpower spattered all around with a *bang!*

Rakshasa became unable to hold its dragon form and melted away into sticky, unsightly mud. The liquid was pulled by gravity and sank into the hole, disappearing from view.

"Ahhh… This is bad news… That was Yusei's strongest Varmint…"

The collapse wasn't over.

Rocks kept storming from the sky.

I pulled Fuyao's hand and propped her on my shoulder while looking at Star Cave.

"Let's go back! We gotta treat yo— UGH?!"

A shock ran through my body and rocked my brain.

It took me a moment to realize we had been blown away.

It felt like I had been tackled. I directed my eyes from the ground by the entrance of Star Cave over to the spot where Rakshasa had been.

What…is that?

A black liquid.

It surrounded Tremolo and wriggled like the tentacles of an octopus.

Pitch-black miasma brimmed and enveloped the ravaged Lunar Village.

It was like the town was being overtaken by mold.

The miasma crept up the cliff and toward the twilight sky, heading for Neoplus.

Miasma slinked toward me like maggots.

I yelped and crawled backward.

Then I heard voices. Cries, moans, wails—the Varmint's black willpower, the vile energy created from people's sadness.

Their regrets and grudges sped through the air to my heart.

This must've been what attacked us. But forget analysis.

"Grugh." I held my breath, holding back mynausea.

What in the world? Aren't Varmints supposed to die after you break their core?

It was too gruesome. I'd never felt something like this.

"Oh well. I'll have to make good use of Rakshasa."

Cloing, cloing, cloing.

Tremolo played the biwa.

The strings wrapped around Rakshasa's remains and converged. The instrument must've had the power to gather willpower. The next moment, the black energy was spread around at dreadful speed. The tentacle-shaped things deftly broke through the rain of rubble.

It was like the rampage of a mythical monster.

I couldn't possibly stand a chance against that.

I was afraid. There was nothing but fear on my mind.

"…Terakomari, let's withdraw…"

"Fuyao…!"

The foxgirl stood up, short of breath. She had recovered her spirits.

Right. Don't let fear paralyze you. We gotta retreat.

Tremolo is distracted by the rocks. Now's our chance.

Fuyao and I propped each other up as we fled Lunar Village.

☆

I walked through the temple in the dark with Lingzi Ailan.

It was like a cemetery. Miasma crept by my feet.

Maybe I'd get to see her face at the end of this.

Excited, I bounded down the stairs.

"Spica… Is Meihua here…?"

"The Nightsky Ring shows these coordinates. Maybe she's farther underground."

I looked up at the ceiling.

I felt the presence of the Varmints. Or rather, a surge of negative willpower.

Then an earthquake shook the temple.

"Eep!" Lingzi yelped and fell on her butt.

The place kept shaking. Something was going berserk up there.

"Wh-wh-what?! Is it a Varmint…?!"

"It's far away; don't worry. C'mon, stand up."

I held out my hand to her.

She hesitated for a moment before grabbing my hand fearfully.

So sweet. Made me want to tease her. Put a collar on her and make her my pet.

"Won't the ceiling crumble…?"

"Heh-heh, it does feel like it might! Maybe we'll be buried alive!"

"Hyuu…"

"Let's go."

I pulled Lingzi's hand forward.

Beat Star Citadel here, and the rest would be a walk in the park. We would collect the Dark Core and go to the God Slayer Tower. Then world peace would follow. The girl I'd been separated from six hundred years ago would be at the top, waiting for me…

We eventually found ourselves in an open area, like a gymnasium.

This seemed to be the origin of the miasma. I hid behind a column and looked into the hall.

The ceiling and walls were crumbled in spots, and the purple of the Mandala minerals was visible here and there. A bunch of coffins had been neatly arranged. Some of them were open, as if the dead had risen and exited on their own.

Ahead was an altar. An extremely plain altar but one I remembered. On the middle of it was a spring full of shiny liquid, from which black miasma overflowed.

That had to be the Dark Spring.

The magical phenomenon that was used in the Foreworld to send blood to the Dark Core.

It wasn't only for blood; the spring could be configured to transmit any type of energy.

"Meihua!" Lingzi raised her voice and sprinted ahead.

A familiar Immortal lay in the coffin closest to us.

Meihua Liang.

Lingzi's retainer, who had gone missing after the Dark Core's collapse.

I knew she was in Star Cave, but I hadn't expected her to be in a coffin.

Lingzi shed tears as she clutched her retainer's cold hand.

"Meihua! Meihua! Wake up…! Please wake up…!"

"…Uh—uh… Lingzi…?"

"Meihua…!"

Surprisingly, Meihua Liang was conscious.

Her face was pale and she appeared malnourished, but her heart was beating.

"What are you doing here…?"

"Thank goodness…! I'm here to save you, Meihua!"

I ignored the pair and walked ahead.

I cut through the sticky miasma with my hand.

Other people, still alive, were trapped in the other coffins. They stared quietly into the void, as though waiting for their deaths.

The star marks on their bodies were unmistakable.

Willpower was spilling from the marks and being sucked into the Dark Spring.

Meihua groaned while Lingzi looked after her.

"I… I…"

"Calm down and tell me what happened…"

"I… I was thrown into the mining city… Then a black beast attacked me. When I came to, I was here… Other people were captured, too, but they killed them…"

"But you…"

"I… I was left alive and trapped here for some reason. Some of the others are still alive, too… I think they wanted to steal our willpower."

Of course, of course.

They stole the willpower of their hostages and turned it into miasma to send to the spring.

The people being held here had to be Core Implosion users.

Core Implosion manifested only in those with a spine. People who could stand back up no matter how many times their spirit was broken; naturally, they had a massive volume of willpower that could be harvested.

"Hmm…"

Star Citadel seemed to be planning on filling the Netherworld with miasma.

Miasma was energy for Yusei.

They were creating the perfect environment for her to run wild.

I could not overlook this.

I stepped onto the altar and peered into the miasma-drenched Dark Spring.

Its construction was the same as those in the Six Nations, but it couldn't be connected to the Dark Core. It had to be linked to a special tool meant to muddle willpower and transform it into miasma, or…

Plop.

A drop of something fell on my hat.

I looked up on reflex.

Black liquid was seeping through the ceiling.

Water? Is there a lake up there or something?

No, that wasn't water. It was miasma.

It was so dense, it had materialized into a liquid.

I'd never seen something like this.

It would take some effort to sweep it all away from the Netherworld…

Clench!

Someone grabbed my wrist.

The feel of cold skin.

It startled me so badly, I couldn't even yelp.

A cold sweat formed on my back for the first time in centuries, and I slowly dropped my gaze.

A thin arm had emerged from the spring to take hold of my wrist.

"Hee-hee-hee."

I heard an eerie laugh.

A girl's shadow emerged from the other side of the ripples.

"Who are you?"

The arm's owner did not answer.

Instead, black willpower crept from her fingertips.

Her nails sank into me and tore through my skin. They split my veins and made me bleed.

I immediately tried to retreat, but she was stronger than I expected, and I nearly tripped.

"You don't like cutting your fingernails? I don't like those sorts of people—"

Someone screamed.

It was Lingzi, calling my name.

She repeatedly yelled at me to run.

For some reason, I couldn't move. The next thing I knew, the miasma wrapped around my ankles. I felt a shuddering aura of malice as all the muscles in my body were immobilized.

Oh.

The Dark Spring is connected to her body.

That means she…

…she's the root of all evil.

The star in the twilight sky who changes people's hearts for the worse.

"Sweet Spica. Die," whispered the girl in the spring.

Miasma overflowed from the spring like a flash flood and swallowed me in the blink of an eye.

☆

Black.

Everything around them was black.

The first things the Komari Search Team saw as they arrived in the mining city of Neoplus were a black evening sky, sunken earth, and grim miasma creeping across the roads.

It was pandemonium. There were people screaming in panic. There were people who had gone quiet, as if the miasma had swallowed their souls. There were people fleeing in all directions.

"…What is this? Hell?"

"Lady Karla, they say there's a hot spring over there. A Mandala spring where the water glows purple. How about we go clean our fatigue from the trip?"

"How can you even think of tourism in the face of this?!"

"Oh." Koharu's expression turned serious as she took in the sight of the disaster.

It had been a few days since they'd started heading south, with Kilty Blanc in the lead.

Karla's muscles were sore and her feet were covered in blisters, but they had finally reached the city where they believed Terakomari Gandesblood had been brought after her abduction.

But what in the world happened here?

It looked like the nightmares she would have after her grandmother would knock her out during training.

Plap. Miasma crept onto her feet.

"Eek?!"

"Move back, Ms. Karla!"

Whack! Sakuna hit it hard with her staff, but that didn't seem to work; the miasma looked as if it were made of mayonnaise.

However, seeing as it failed to take Karla by surprise, the miasma writhed away in search of other prey.

"Uuugh." Sakuna frowned as she stared at the liquid clinging to her staff. "It's so sticky. Will it come off…?"

"I don't think you should touch it," Kilty said timidly. "That is negative willpower. You'll become sick with etiolation like Monique…"

"What's this doing here?"

"Sorry, I have no idea… But we can be sure Star Citadel is involved. There's no one else who would use willpower for something so evil…"

“Hey.” Koharu pulled on Kilty’s clothes. “Are those black things like animals or something? I want one as a pet.”

Karla followed her gaze.

Big black beasts (?) were going around destroying houses.

What were they? They looked like the miasma the group had encountered just now, but giant.

“Those must be Varmints. I heard they’re monsters that appear in the mines of Neoplus and attack people.”

“Which means we should go to the mines.”

Karla clenched her hand and took a step forward.

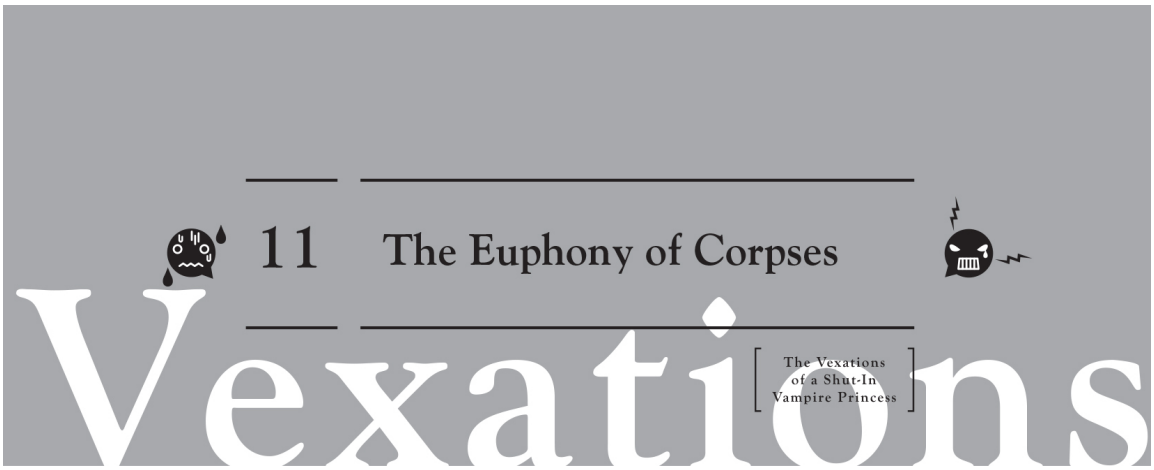
Komari and Kakumei Amatsu were somewhere in this city. They might even be getting attacked by the miasma or Varmints right now. They had to find them as soon as possible.

“Let’s go, everyone! We will take Ms. Komari back and return to our world!”

Everyone in the squad yelled in the affirmative in return.

The skies of Neoplus were dyed an eerie black.

Karla had to wonder—was this hellish landscape the world her future self had experienced?



I had a comfortable life.

We were a family of four: me, my older brother, my mom, and my dad.

Lunar was a tiny village, incomparable to the size of the royal capital, but I loved its peace and quiet.

Yes. How could I forget?

There were two suns in the sky back then. Until all of a sudden, there was only one. The same time that happened, my memories became hazy.

"Do not remember. Think only of your revenge," someone whispered.

"Fuu, is your dish ready?"

I heard my mother's voice.

It was the day before the festival. Lunar Village worshiped the god of the harvest, and the whole village got together to hold a ceremony for our deity a few times a year.

My and Mom's job was to make mochi.

I got bored halfway through making it and started playing with the mochi, using it as clay to construct animal shapes.

"Dear." Mom held her hand to her cheek. "You shouldn't play with food. Our god will get mad."

"…But I'm just so bored."

I always liked playing outside. I used to run around the village

with my brother and his friends. Staying home to cook was tedious.

"Everyone has to do their job for the festival."

"But my brother is outside playing."

"He's not playing. He's working with your dad."

I refused to believe her. I ignored my mother and made the mochi dolls fight one another.

"Oh, geez." She smiled, sighing at the sight of her daughter's puffy cheeks. "Okay, then go deliver lunch to your father and brother."

"…! Yeah!"

I nodded and accepted the lunch boxes before flying out of the house.

Thump! Thump! I could hear hammering coming from the altar.

The men were cutting down trees and carrying materials.

The whole village was jittery with anticipation for the festival, and just walking down the streets made me feel weirdly excited.

I couldn't wait to see my brother. As I rushed over, I saw two strange people standing below a cherry tree.

One of them was a tall woman, dressed head to toe in black, with a cigarette in her mouth. The other was also a woman, blindfolded and holding a musical instrument I'd never seen before.

…Who are they?

Clearly, they aren't from here. Travelers?

"Hey, foxgirl." The one with the instrument called out to me.

I walked up to her without any caution.

There was no one more curious than me. Thinking that something fun might happen, I bounded over to them, excited.

"Hello." The woman with the instrument bowed softly. "Pretty bustling village, isn't it? Is there a festival today?"

"Not today. Tomorrow. It's our god's festival…"

She gave me a nice smile.

"Fervent believers, aren't you? But there is something more important than your festival. Girl, have you ever seen a stone that glows purple?"

She took a stone out of her pocket.

I had seen it. Everyone in Lunar Village knew about them.

"You find those on the ground, right…?"

"Yes, and that means there's treasure underground. The biggest treasure of all, one that has the power to change the world. With it, you could do away with all the pain and sadness in people's hearts and bring peace for all eternity. Are you interested?"

"Who are you? A traveling entertainer?"

"My name is… Yes, my name is Yulinne Gandesblood."

"Oh, c'mon." The woman in black chuckled. She puffed on her cigarette and looked at me. "Little fox, don't believe what this bard tells you. She's a crook."

"You don't think she's a fine vessel? Yusei would like it."

"She's a kid. Are you sure?"

"That's why she's so perfect. She can make a beautiful black flower."

"Ha… You really are a crook. You make me sick."

"We'll serve this girl to Yusei. Even if she dies in the soil, her good deeds will be acknowledged, and she'll reach the Land of Bliss. It's for her own good… Ah, sorry, little fox. You probably didn't understand any of that."

"Are you two coming to the festival?"

"We are going to kick off the festival. If you could please, Lady Nerzanpi? Follow my lead."

"Okay, okay… At least it should be easy, since she's still immature."

The woman in black languidly approached me.

She threw away her cigarette and stamped it out with her foot.

"Sorry, little girl. We need a base in the Netherworld, and this village is in the perfect spot. The villagers probably don't know it, but those Mandala minerals are very valuable. And this lady… Yulinne…she wants a lot of money."

"I did away with monetary greed a long time ago. It's Nefty who wants it."

"In any case, we need your assistance. Will you help us?"

I had no idea what was going on.

But they needed my help.

Mom told me I should be kind to people in need.

So I kindly nodded *yes*.

"Poor thing. This is why I like obedient children."

The woman in black grinned.

Then her eyes glowed scarlet.

"Twisted Pedagogy. Now, listen to everything she says."

Plunk.

The lunch boxes fell from my hands onto the ground.

"Huh? What's up, Fuu?"

My brother was at the plaza, helping the villagers put together the altar.

He was quite a bit older than me and really reliable. I loved him.

"Oh, kiddo." The villagers chuckled. "You missed your older brother?" "You gotta learn to let him go." "Wanna help us out?" "Making mochi must be tedious, huh?" It was such a warm mood.

In this world of killings and hatred, they were some of the few purehearted people around.

My brother smiled timidly and looked at me.

I think the next were his last words.

"You'll help us, right, Fuu? Go get some flowers from over there to decorate the al…tar?"

He looked down at me in astonishment.

I had stuck the knife in my hand deep into his stomach.

Blood gushed out like a waterfall, painting the altar red.

Cloing.

The eerie sound of a biwa echoed in the air around us.

"Fuu… Why…?"

"N-no, I—I didn't…"

My brother fell to the ground, unconscious. His heart must have stopped. My gentle brother took his last breath.

My mind crumbled completely the moment I understood that.

"What are you doing, Fuyao?!"

The villagers ran up to hold down the murderer.

Cloing, cloing.

But my body was no longer my own.

I swung the knife with every note of the biwa.

The villagers fell with a scream, one after the other.

"Stop it, Fuyao! …Gwagh!"

The next thing I knew, I was holding a bigger blade.

The musician had slipped it to me.

She whispered like the devil into my ear.

"Go and burn down the village. Beast-folk shouldn't be here. This will be our fortress."

I caught myself setting fire to the houses.

The flames burned loud and extended from one house to another. Maybe I scattered oil while I wasn't aware.

The women cooking inside the houses ran away, panicked.

One by one, I stabbed them with the katana. Some died before understanding what was going on, while others screeched and put up a fight, but they fell prey to my blade either way.

Kill. Swing. Run. Kill. I repeated the cycle again and again like a machine. The flames engulfing the village grew and grew, like a monster. Countless foxpeople had been burned alive.

"Fuu…!"

Cloing, cloing, cloing.

I slashed down the last one of them.

Blood splattered, and my hands and feet went limp. I fell to the ground, and then I realized my mother had fallen before my eyes.

"A-ah…"

My voice came out for the first time in a while, but I was too overcome with emotions to form words.

I clutched my head and tumbled down.

That's not me. I didn't do this. It wasn't me.

It had to be a nightmare. This couldn't be real.

It all happened out of nowhere.

My chest hurt. I couldn't breathe. The smell of blood numbed my senses.

My consciousness faded away.

"Your enemy is Yulinne Gandesblood."

Cloing, cloing.

Someone was standing right next to me.

I was in too much pain to see her face.

"Do not ever forget it. And if you wish to take revenge, then go and train."

Yulinne Gandesblood.

She did all this?

"…You're so twisted. You're blaming a complete stranger?"

"I'm simply helping you. I heard that Crimson Lord is making your job in the first world harder. If this one happens to get strong and fulfill her revenge, then hey, two birds with one stone."

"I see. Thank you for your help. Who knows how many years that'll take, though…"

"Just be patient. Now then, should we go back?"

"Hmm? Ah yes, the storm is close. Let's take this girl, too."

"Don't forget to alter her memories."

"What makes you think a Ruist can do that? I'm no hypnotist."

Cloing, cloing, cloing.

The source of the voice departed, laughing.

Yes. I didn't do it.

This was all Yulinne Gandesblood's fault.

…But the sensation on my hands remained.

The feel of their flesh. The sound of their screams ingrained in my mind.

The eerie *cloing* wouldn't leave my head.

I don't understand. I don't understand.

My mind melted.

Everything faded away.

Color disappeared from the world.

☆

"Ugh…"

Fuyao grimaced in pain.

Obviously. Blood was spilling from her gouged shoulder.

"You okay, Fuyao? Watch your step."

"I know…"

Fuyao and I supported each other on our way through the purple cave.

I could hear the sound of rocks breaking behind us; Tremolo striking with the black miasma.

We had to get as far away as possible.

No, but how will that help? Can we defeat that monster?

"Ah."

Just then Fuyao lost her balance and stumbled.

Being injured myself, I couldn't hold her up. Both of us fell to the rugged rock floor.

A shock ran through me.

I hurried to pull myself up and worriedly looked at Fuyao.

Her eyes were muddied with thought.

She seemed more overcome with mental anguish than physical pain.

"I… I…" Fuyao spoke intermittently. "What have I been doing this whole time…? Getting stronger to take revenge… Joining the terrorists… Hurting so many people…"

"Fuyao…"

"I won't kill anyone who doesn't want to die? That sounds so admirable… If only I could have put this into practice. It was all wrong from the beginning… My life has no meaning. I should've died back then."

Tears filled her eyes.

I had never seen her like this. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't even imagine what could have occurred within her.

I took her hand.

"Don't say you should've died! Let's get out of here together!"

"…It's useless. I remembered everything."

Blood soaked into the ground.

I took bandages out of my backpack and wiped her wound. I knew it wouldn't make much of a difference.

Fuyao stopped me and chuckled in self-deprecation.

"It was me… I'm the one who destroyed Lunar Village."

"Wha…?"

"I got back my memories. On that day eight years ago, I lost myself and wielded the sword. So many people died without a clue. Others went out screaming that they didn't want to die…"

She'd killed the villagers, set fire to the houses, and ruined the celebrations. Fuyao told me everything she had remembered.

It was a heartbreaking story.

And to top it all off, Tremolo and Nerzanpi were behind the whole tragedy. They had not only killed innocent people, but also forced an innocent child to carry the sin.

Black willpower started leaking from Fuyao's body.

Power born from sadness and trauma—the same thing as the Varmints and the miasma filling everything.

Oh no. Fuyao's going to lose herself.

"…Now I understand. I shouldn't be alive. I have no right to have any dreams. Not after I stole them from so many people."

"G-get a hold of yourself! It's not your fault! It's theirs!"

"No. I did it. With my own hands…"

"That's not right! Tremolo manipulated you!"

I clenched my hands into fists and rose to my feet.

This could not stand. When would they be satisfied with all the deception?

"But…"

"This is a psychological attack! Don't falter! If you can't take it, just count on me!"

"Huh…?"

Her fox ears twitched in surprise.

I held my hand out to her.

"Let's go. Can you walk?"

"…"

She stared at me with eyes full of shock. After some hesitation, Fuyao looked down and silently grabbed my hand.

☆

It seemed like we were lost.

I had no idea where in Star Cave we were. I could hear Tremolo making noise in the distance, but I think she'd lost us, too.

We walked for a while before we reached an underground lake. Maybe it was where rainwater ended up.

The water glowed purple. Even the lake was full of Mandala minerals. It was incomparably brighter here than anywhere else in Star Cave, though.

"…There's a mana reaction. There must be a lot of minerals," said Fuyao.

"Really? I mean, it is pretty bright."

I sat down on the ridge before the lake and took my flask out of my backpack to drink some water.

I was running out of energy and had to rest before I collapsed.

Fuyao clutched her shoulder in pain.

Her wound would be beyond salvation if we kept wandering around Star Cave like this. We had to find Lingzi and Spica ASAP and leave this place.

"You okay? You gotta be hurting, right?" I asked.

"It's no big deal. I get injuries like this all the time," said Fuyao.

"I'm sorry…"

"…Why are you apologizing?"

"You wouldn't have gotten hurt if I'd done better."

Fuyao sighed in exasperation.

Her expression softened a bit.

"Don't be stupid. It's not your fault I got hurt."

"But I couldn't do anything except stand back and watch…"

"Now you're weighing yourself down with nonsensical burdens. You'll end up suffocating if you hold yourself at fault for the smallest things. Maybe that's what's keeping you so short."

"Wha—?! What's that got to do with anything?!"

"Just saying."

A smile escaped her. A pure smile unbefitting of a killer.

Fuyao quickly looked away upon noticing my gaze.

"By the way"—she changed topics hesitatingly—"while you might not have anything to apologize for, I think I do."

"Huh?"

"My world is on its head." She spoke falteringly, a pained look on her face. "I've been fighting for an ideal that turned out to be a sham. I've hurt countless people…people who fell victim to the lies I believed in. I'm beyond forgiveness."

"Fuyao…?"

"Like with the Heavenly Paradise. I forced Karin Reigetsu, Karla Amatsu, and the Peace Spirits to bear so much sadness. Maybe I don't have the right to say it at this point, but I still have to make things right. I'm sorry."

What happened? I thought she was a cruel, cold-blooded terrorist. Now she was lowering her head in regret for her past deeds.

Maybe I wasn't wrong for thinking we could talk things out and come to understand each other, even if we'd once fought to the death.

"…You should say that to Karla and Karin." I smiled. "Also…your ideal is not a sham. Your means were absolutely terrible, but there's something I can sympathize with at the root of your idea. I realized that after talking with you. So don't be so sad."

"I…" Fuyao's ears twitched. "I'm not sad! Don't be ridiculous."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"…"

I sighed, relieved. The miasma surrounding Fuyao was fading. Maybe she'd cheered up a little.

The tension between us eased.

You really could come to an understanding with almost anyone, even terrorists.

Now we just had to find everyone and go back home. Then we'd be good for a while.

"Hmm?"

All of a sudden, the light in the lake brightened.

Something floated up, four inches from the surface.

I squinted to try to get a better look and almost fainted from the shock.

That's…a sphere that shines like a star?

"The Dark Core…!"

Fuyao stood.

The Netherworld's Dark Core that was buried somewhere in Star Cave.

How could such an absurd coincidence—? No, wait. The rainbow Blood Curse was still active. Immortal blood gave me unbelievable luck; the world took my side. This had to be the real Dark Core.

"Let's grab it. We can't let Star Citadel get their hands on it," said Fuyao.

"B-but how?! I practiced swimming last summer, but I haven't been to the beach or a pool since, so I'd probably drow—"

"I'll go."

"Wait! Keep your clothes on! You're hurt!"

I panicked and tried to stop Fuyao from getting naked.

If only we had, like, a really long stick or something… As I thought hard on what to do instead…

Cloing.

"I see. So this is where our treasure was."

A violent sandstorm brewed in Star Cave.

I shielded Fuyao and crouched down automatically.

Boulders flew like crumpled pieces of paper. They banged into the walls with a rumble so intense, I was shaken to the bone.

I looked up in confusion and found Tremolo standing there, shrouded in pitch-black miasma.

Octopus tentacles wriggled as if they had inherited Rakshasa's power, but were more sinister. I shuddered simply looking at them.

She had dug her way through the walls of Star Cave to reach us.

"I must thank Nefty for blowing up the cave. And you for running all the way here. Now we are one step closer to our wish coming true."

"Hey! Don't you…!"

Tremolo shot a tentacle at the lake. The miasma-infested feeler wrapped around the Dark Core and brought it swiftly to her hand. The biwa bard's lips curled in an eerie smile as she looked at the shiny mana treasure in her grasp.

"Ahhh… Yusei will be delighted."

"Th-that's not fair! You gotta swim to grab it!"

"Hee-hee. I'm not very athletic, you see," she said, putting the Dark Core in her pocket.

It's over. Right when we thought we were back…

"Don't worry," Fuyao whispered calmly. "I was told the Dark Cores won't work until you find all six. The only thing it can do is reinforce her mana."

"But isn't it still super important?!"

"We can just kill her and take it back."

Tremolo sneered. Her eyes seemed to mock everything in sight.

"Not happening. Your spirit is broken."

"What?"

"I'll tell you the truth. We never needed to destroy Lunar Village."

Fuyao froze.

The devilish words gouged my heart, too.

"The Dark Core lay somewhere in this land, and we wanted to unearth it. The foxes were in the way, yes, but we could have simply driven them elsewhere. So why did we enact that massacre? Because I wanted to harvest the miasma—the willpower of sadness. My biwa absorbs the miasma and becomes energy to make Yusei grow."

"What…?"

"I've massacred countless villages throughout the Netherworld. Just like I did to Lumiere. But I never killed every single inhabitant. I always made sure someone survived."

The black tentacles wriggled. They could strike at any minute.

I grabbed Fuyao's clothes and braced myself.

"Some of them are driven to revenge; some are taken over by wrath; some lose themselves to tears. The explosions of emotions become negative willpower that spills into the outside world and taints it."

"What are you even…?"

"You were my magnum opus, Fuyao. Yusei will love the miasma coming out of you. Destroying Lunar Village eight years ago was the perfect choice."

"…!" Fuyao glared at her, full of hatred. "You… It really was all

your doing… I'll kill you…"

"It wasn't *all* me. Everything in this world has a destiny. Lunar Village was fated to end. Yet the inhabitants spent their time putting on festivals and celebrating. Aren't humans such adorable creatures?"

Fuyao screamed in anger.

"W-wait, Fuyao! Uwah!"

I was swept away and fell to my butt.

She raised the Null Night Blade and ran toward Tremolo, surging with courageous intent. Slicing the tentacles attacking her, she managed to bring her sword within an inch of the bard's chest, when…

"Agh!"

…she lost her balance and staggered. Was it the pain of her wound?

The tentacles seized the opening and rammed her midsection.

Fuyao let out a short scream as she was blown away.

She bounced repeatedly on the ground all the way back to me.

"You poor, poor thing. But rejoice—bliss is promised to you."

The black tentacles writhed upward, their tips shifting into the shape of a scythe.

They were ready to end us.

"Those sacrificed for Yusei can go to the Land of Bliss. There is no sadness or pain there. You will get to meet your mom and dad again, Fuu."

"—"

Fuyao shuddered.

She tried standing but couldn't. She was too wounded to move freely.

Anger, frustration, sadness… All sorts of negative emotions reduced her to a tearful, shivering mess. My heart beat annoyingly loud as I saw her tail shrivel and droop to the ground.

It was too abominable. Tremolo had stolen everything from this girl.

If it weren't for her, the fox beast-folk would have been living in peace even now.

She was just like Nerzanpi. Star Citadel's methods were nothing less than pure evil.

I couldn't let Tremolo keep doing this.

"…It's okay, Fuyao."

"!"

I gently placed my hand on her shoulder.

"You did well. Don't you worry anymore."

"Wh-what's that look on your face…?! Don't worry about me!"

"I can't! I worry about my friends."

"Wh-wha—?" Fuyao closed her eyes, trembling. "We're not friends! I'm not like you! I'm a murderer! I deserve to die!"

"No! It's all Tremolo's fault!"

"That's right, and I have to kill her! I won't stop! That's the least I can do…for my family and everyone in Lunar… I will put an end to her here and now!!"

"But you're hurt, Fuyao."

"This is nothing! Just a flesh wou—"

"I'll do it for you. Just lend me your power."

I drew my face close to her injury.

Tremolo was not about to let me taste blood. The flock of tentacles stormed at us.

"Run, Terakomari!" Fuyao yelled.

But then Tremolo capsized, accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

Her footing shifted unnaturally.

"Oh my," the bard said as she regained her balance.

The tentacles' trajectory drifted, and the whoosh of them slicing air reached my ear.

My good luck from Lingzi's blood ran out with an explosion of rainbow mana.

Slurp. Then I licked Fuyao's blood.

"Ugh." Fuyao frowned in disgust.

Don't react like that. I'm making sure we have a happy ending. Everyone's dreams will come true. I'll put an end to Tremolo's evildoings and make Star Citadel repent.

Ba-thump. Vast mana surged from within my heart.

The world lit up in a flash.

☆

"Gah?! Wha…?!"

Tremolo saw the light expand. That same instant, something plunged into her stomach.

An incandescent light like the sun's trailed behind Terakomari Gandesblood.

The moment Tremolo realized the girl's small fist had driven into her belly, she was blown backward without regard for any and all laws of physics.

She heard her tentacles being ripped apart.

Tremolo flew like a comet with a tail of miasma-sludge until she slammed back-first into Star Cave. The impact nearly made her pass out. The cluster of miasma dispersed, and the power she'd leeched from Rakshasa melted away.

Then it hit her.

It was bright like noon.

She wondered if Star Cave's ceiling had crumbled, but that could not be possible.

She was deep underground, and even if the sky were visible, it was dusk.

"Tremolo."

Then she saw something terrifying.

The sun.

In the middle of the wrecked hall stood a shining star—a vampire shielding the injured Fuyao Meteorite.

She had foxlike ears on her head. A giant tail at her hip.

This was it. The Blood Curse activated by beast-folk blood.

Pretty unique shape, huh? Tremolo chuckled to herself.

"Now it's getting interesting. So what can you do with tha—?"

Terakomari vanished in the blink of an eye.

Tremolo looked around in a panic.
To her right, a giant source of heat.
“You’ll pay.”
“?!”
A weak-looking fist appeared before her eyes.
It came at the speed of light.


©riichu



Tremolo immediately tried guarding herself with her tendrils, but it was in vain.

The miasma thawed like ice in the presence of Terakomari's light. Positive willpower to neutralize the negative.

No—to swallow it.

The next moment, the fist rammed into her face.

"Eyaaaaargh?!" Tremolo screamed as she went flying once more.

Her head hurt. She was bleeding.

Still, she couldn't allow herself to go down. She pulled the strings of her biwa—*cloing, cloing*—to infuse willpower into the tentacles and shape the black miasma into a mat that would break her fall.

"Futile."

She heard Terakomari's voice coming from the direction in which she was flying.

This time, the girl kicked her gut.

"Gebh!"

Tremolo fell into the lake, jetted through the water, and crashed into its bottom.

A shock. Multiple broken bones.

Terakomari was too fast. Tremolo could not follow with her eyes.

She spewed bubbles while looking up.

The fox-eared sun glared at her from the surface of the lake.

How? Terakomari illuminated even the dark depths of the water.

Her power was that of the sun itself.

Tremolo would boil alive if she stayed in the lake.

She pushed herself up with the tentacles.

A powerful splash broke as she rose from the water and touched down on dry land.

Her body felt heavy. Water dripped from her clothes and hair.

This was ridiculous. How could one obtain such power? Tremolo endured the sharp pain and smiled.

"H-heh… Impressive, Terakomari Gandesblood. You're not to be trifled with."

"Apologize…to everyone."

The vampire landed with an earth-shattering crash.

Tremolo stared at her power in despair.

Terakomari looked godly. Like the ruler of all nature.

The sunlight, the root of all living things. The symbol of life worshiped by the beast-folk.

The Blood Curse was the undefeatable Core Implosion of legend, said to appear once in a millennium. The miraculous power brought about by injesting beast-folk blood was that of the rising sun—the ultimate miasma-eradicating force.

"Very well. I will play with you."

Terakomari's power was simple: overwhelming physical strength and strong light to dispel the darkness.

There could be no worse foe for Tremolo. She had no time to set up the Myogo String.

Instead, the bard gathered all the miasma she could. The power to kill all hindrances, which was amassed in Rakshasa.

Writhing black willpower converged around Tremolo within the bright cave.

Whether or not she was facing an easy foe, she had to emerge victorious. It was her duty as a member of Star Citadel.

"Come, Terakomari Gandesblood. Let's begin your last batt—"

Pssh. The miasma disappeared all of a sudden.

Tremolo looked around in confusion. She had just been about to use the tentacles to skewer Terakomari…but they were gone now.

Vaporized by Terakomari's light.

"Th-this is too…"

The moment she felt a cold sweat run down her cheek…

"Die."

…she saw a tiny fist right before her eyes.

☆

The light of the sun embraced her heart.

All of a sudden, her glum mood vanished. The mere sight of Terakomari's light filled her with infinite hope.

The pain disappeared from Fuyao's mind, replaced by interest in the battle unfolding before her.

Tremolo's creepy tentacles evaporated.

Terakomari punched and kicked the agitated bard without a shred of mercy.

It was a slaughter.

Tremolo could do nothing without her strings or tentacles.

It was a fantastical sight. The fox-eared vampire flew at the speed of light.

"Let's calm down, please. Star Citadel's wish won— GWEH!"

Terakomari threw her fist into Tremolo's face again.

Was that the sound of the bard's bones breaking?

"No. You will pay."

The color of bloodlust gleamed in Terakomari's eyes.

Fuyao then understood why people were attracted to her.

She fought evil and was kind to those in need. Despite her bloodthirsty eyes, she wished for peace from the bottom of her heart.

There was no doubt. She was more magnificent than even Spica La Gemini.

"Don't think I'll let you keep going, you cheeky little brat."

There wasn't a speck of serenity on Tremolo's face.

Cloing, cloing. Out of the blue, the biwa sounded again.

A swarm of tentacles grew from the ground by Tremolo's feet. Each of them writhed like they had a mind of their own, then charged ferociously at Terakomari.

However, they could not hope to reach the light-speed vampire princess.

The tentacles whipped Star Cave's walls into a crumbling mess as Terakomari dodged every attack with animalistic leaps and bounds.

Fwsh! The tentacles were vaporized again.

Tremolo took a knife out of her pocket and yelled.

"Stop! Terakomari!"

Terakomari kicked off the ground to accelerate. No, that description fell short of her speed. She teleported.

"Divine punishment will befall you if you keep interfering with

Star Citadel's ambitions! Nefty Strawberry and Yusei will not let this slide!"

"So what?"

"So—"

Klink! She flicked Tremolo's knife with her pinkie finger.

All color drained from the bard's face.

Cloing, cloing.

Yet she would not give up. She produced a Magic Stone and aimed at Terakomari.

"Shoo."

Terakomari banished the Magic Stone with an acrobatic roundhouse kick.

The stone fell into the lake, and the magic escaped it in a giant explosion.

Terakomari was unfazed. Emitting Effulgent light, she glared coldly at the root of all evil as the water from the lake rained down on her.

"A-ahhh…"

Tremolo fell on her behind.

There was nothing else she could do.

Fuyao watched with a flood of emotions.

She wanted to take revenge by her own hand. But Terakomari was so bright, such a feeling felt trifling. Maybe this vampire could make her ideal world a reality.

She was beautiful. A far cry from herself.

If only she had known the girl's true nature earlier. Or they had met under different circumstances. But it was pointless to ponder hypotheticals.

Terakomari softly parted her lips.

"Tremolo. Are you prepared?"

"!! N-not at all. I'm afraid to die."

"Too bad. Die."

Her glowing fist came down.

Tremolo watched in bewilderment.

The punch hammered her face.

The sound of something bursting.

Bones broke and clothes fluttered in the middle of the nuclear shock wave. Tremolo Parcostella plunged into the earth. Then she fell deathly quiet.

☆

The light of mana faded.

My Core Implosion came to an end. My ears and tail melted into mana particles (apparently, they weren't physical objects), and I went back to normal.

I fell to my knees the moment my powers subsided.

Unbearable fatigue and sharp pain all over my body.

I never use my muscles like that…

"Terakomari…"

I heard a hoarse voice.

Fuyao was leaning against a wall to keep upright. She was gravely injured. We had to get her to a doctor quickly.

"You okay? We have to get out of here."

"…I'm worried about you." Fuyao seemed as if she was about to cry for some reason. She ground her teeth and took a deep breath before continuing, "Look at you. You must be hurting…"

I was shocked, to say the least. *She* was worried about *me*?

I couldn't believe it after how she smugly she'd told me pain makes you grow.

A smile escaped me.

"That doesn't matter. I mean, it does hurt… But I'm just glad you're okay."

"…"

I was completely sincere. Fuyao was a terrorist, and she had hurt me before, yes. But we'd become close after fighting Star Citadel together in Neoplus.

"…There's something wrong with you. That naïveté will be the end of you one day."

"But it won't be by your hand. I'm not brave enough to die, after all."

"Yeah… But…" Fuyao cast her glance down in repentance. "I'm a terrible murderer. All this time, I did everything thinking it was for Lunar Village… So that no one would suffer what they did… But everything was broken from the beginning. I'm sorry to say this after you saved me, but I don't have any right to live."

"That's not true!"

Her fox ears twitched in reaction to my shout.

I felt like she would disappear if I didn't do something now.

"I'm in no position to say anything, but… I don't think there's anyone out there who has no right to live. You're not just a killer. You saved me, remember? Sure, you're a huge murderer…but I know there's a good side to you, too."

"…You don't know that."

"I do. That's why I think you should live the way you want. I mean, not if it's killing more people, but I'd like to help you…if there's anything I can do."

"But…"

"And you have Spica, too. She accepts you."

"…" Fuyao pursed her lips, then looked away. "Instead of Her Highness, I'd rather have…"

"What was that?"

"…Nothing. You really are crazy. I'll kill you one day."

"Why?!"

"It was just a figure of speech. What I mean is, we'll settle this score eventually."

"O-okay…"

Millicent and Flöte did talk about killing me all the time. Maybe it was just a sort of greeting for those with terroristic tendencies.

In any case, that was one fight over.

The miasma was purged, and clean air filled Star Cave.

Fuyao didn't seem fully recovered mentally yet, but time would take care of that. The people of Lunar would have wanted her to live in peace.

A bit refreshed, I held my hand out to her.

"Let's go. We gotta find Lingzi and Spica."

"Yeah… No, wait. We have to get the Dark Core first."

Fuyao reached for my palm, but in the end, our hands didn't meet.

Cloing.

The sound of the biwa flipped the world.

Fuyao whimpered.

Dazed, I stared at her face.

Why did she look so surprised?

Why did she scream in so much distress?

"Uh…"

I felt something rising from the pit of my stomach.

Blood spurted out of my mouth.

I collapsed.

The next thing I knew, a black tentacle had struck my belly.

"TREMOLO!!" Fuyao turned around, roaring.

The tentacle that had pierced my torso slithered back to its master.

It drew back into the vestment of Tremolo Parcostella, still sunken in the ground.

Why? How?

She was supposed to be unconscious.

Then I saw it.

The band covering her eyes was torn apart.

Her wide-open, full-moon, bright-red eyes were exposed.

"Core Implosion: *Necrocurse Mandala*."

The moment she parted her lips, a terrifying volume of miasma oozed from her every pore.

The miasma took the form of a serpent and attacked.

What? This can't be. I won.

Amatsu's words crossed my mind.

"She has a hidden power."

Right. So Tremolo's hidden power was Core Implosion.

"Ugweh."

I was out of energy.

The pain and blood loss racked my brain. It took me a moment to

realize I was lying on the ground.

I couldn't stand up. Fuyao was yelling something, but my ears were out of service already; I heard only noise.

For some reason, all I could hear clearly was the *cloing* of the biwa.

"I've exhausted the full extent of my power. Terakomari Gandesblood, I'll show you to hell."

A voice that pulled me to the world of the dead.

It was the miraculous power materialized by Tremolo's rancor. A curse that brought me down with her.

☆

Cloing, cloing.

Tremolo Parcostella's body vanished with the wind, as though it were ash scattered at a funeral.

What remained were her biwa, her torn blindfold and vestments, the cursed mass oozing from her body, and myriad writhing tentacles.

Fuyao Meteorite's tail bristled.

She never imagined a person's emotions could take such a dreadful shape.

Tremolo Parcostella had consumed her life in exchange for activating her Core Implosion. She had been prepared to give herself up for the sake of Star Citadel's ambitions.

The world of light Terakomari had purified returned to darkness.

Tremolo's willpower was too powerful. How could one possibly shatter it?

"Goddamn it… Terakomari! Wake up!"

The small vampire was limp.

No response. The girl was breathing, but bleeding terribly. Her heartbeat was slowing, too. She would die in less than ten minutes if Fuyao didn't do something; the foxgirl knew this from experience.

The tentacles attacked her all at once.

Fuyao slashed back with the Null Night Blade, but the tendrils were too firm. Her sword was repelled, as though she'd hit it against a boulder. She felt her hands grow numb as she lost her balance and was smacked to the ground.

"Gwah…!"

Yet the tentacles hadn't been after her in the first place. Their dreadful trajectories were aimed squarely on Terakomari.

Why go for someone who couldn't move? Fuyao had no time to pontificate over it.

She mustered the last of her strength to rise to her feet and grab Terakomari in a mad dash for their lives.

Despite her multiple broken bones, Fuyao ran with all her might.

"What the hell is it with these things?!"

She turned and tried using her momentum to strike one of the approaching tendrils.

She could not slice it. The tentacle changed direction and crashed into the wall, making the ground tremble.

Fuyao stumbled but put her entire body into making sure not to drop Terakomari.

She kept running in a frenzy as the tentacles ravaged Star Cave like giant serpents.

They were after Terakomari. She shined so brightly, her light amplified the grudges of those in the shadows.

Tremolo should have died alone. Why bring someone full of hope for the future down to hell with her? How could one be so wretched?

"Terakomari!! Don't you die!!"

The girl under her arm said nothing.

She didn't want this dumb vampire to suffer any more.

She had to live. Her kindness changed the hearts of others. She was not meant to die here.

"Ugh!"

Then another voice popped into Fuyao's mind.

The voice of the killer born from the miasma.

Die. Die. Die. No one must get in the way of the star's ambitions.

"Shut up! You die!!"

Hail. Glory to Yusei. Hail, hail, hail. The world belongs in Yusei's hands, so it will be embraced by perpetual peace.

"That's not happening! Your methods are wrong!"

Terakomari Gandesblood stands in the way of the star. She will die here. Die. Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die.

"I told you to SHUT THE FUCK UP!!"

Fuyao swung the Null Night Blade at the tentacles, but the effects remained minimal. Instead, Fuyao was blown away and slammed into a purple wall.

The heart-gouging shadow of death crushed her spirits.

But she could not let go of Terakomari.

Abandoning her would be a blemish to Fuyao Meteorite's beliefs. No, forget about conviction. She simply burned with the desire to keep this small vampire alive.

Black tentacles attacked from every direction.

Fuyao raised her katana with explosive vigor.

The moment her blade struck, the tentacle crumbled, and its black willpower dissipated.

They had hard parts and soft parts.

So long as she could aim correctly…

A shock, followed by sharp pain.

Another tentacle had stabbed Fuyao's side. That didn't matter. She yelled and swung her sword. Blood spilled, and her fox ears were torn, yet she fought frantically to keep Terakomari alive.

But perhaps her efforts were in vain.

Tremolo's dying willpower far exceeded Fuyao's.

The tentacles struck her wrist, and the Null Night Blade spun in the air away from her.

She had no opportunity to recover it. The sharp tentacles were already charging at her.

I'm dead.

The moment she thought that, one of the walls of Star Cave crumbled.

It exploded, to be precise.

The blast sent debris flying, blowing away the helpless tentacles.

Fuyao shielded Terakomari while desperately trying to comprehend the situation.

She had been saved by a hair. Was Terakomari's rainbow mana still active?

Then she heard an out-of-place, shrill voice.

"Owaaah?! What are these?! Varmints?!"

Standing by the destroyed wall was Lonne Cornelius.

Behind her was a man in Eastern-style clothing holding a Magic Stone.

"That must be Tremolo Parcostella's finishing move. This tiny explosion won't take care of it."

One of the Lunae, Kakumei Amatsu.

He looked around, the thoughts behind his eyes as incomprehensible to Fuyao as ever.

Their eyes met, and he appeared to grasp the whole situation.

"You're in better shape than I thought."

"Are you blind?"

"Terakomari isn't, though. We must retreat. Cornelius!"

"Got it!"

The tentacles writhed by the wall. The explosion had slowed them, but Fuyao's gut told her they weren't greatly damaged.

Cornelius rushed her to her feet, while Amatsu lifted moribund Terakomari.

"Let's hurry. Defeating her won't be easy," he said.

"You knew?"

"Kind of."

Amatsu went through the hole in the wall.

Cornelius helped Fuyao follow behind him.

She looked back. The tentacles wriggled in search of their prey.

Amatsu threw another Magic Stone.

A huge explosion made the ceiling collapse, forming a wall between them and the tentacles.

"Just focus on leaving. We have a route back to the exit."

☆

Amatsu, Cornelius, and Tryphon's job was to find Governor Sandberry, but they had hurried to Star Cave after the giant explosion.

Incidentally, Tryphon was elsewhere looking for Spica.

"I think they'll break the wall at any moment… Those things are spooky as hell," Cornelius said.

Black willpower oozed from behind them, accompanied by the sound of the tentacles knocking on the debris.

It was only a matter of time before the tendrils caught up with them.

Fuyao looked at Terakomari in Amatsu's arms.

The mere sound of her pained breathing suffocated Fuyao.

It suffocates me…?

There really was something wrong with her. Fuyao Meteorite didn't worry for other people.

Terakomari had the mysterious power to change the heart of even a cold-blooded killer.

"I'll keep it short," Amatsu said while running. "Tremolo Parcostella's ability won't stop until it's killed its target. Her willpower also grows stronger with time, so the attacks will only get tougher."

"Whoa, whoa." Cornelius sighed. "How do you know? And that's Tremolo's power? To me, it looks like a mass of willpower that's been given a specific objective, like the Varmints."

"No, Kakumei Amatsu is right," Fuyao said, short of breath.

"Huh? Really?"

"That's Tremolo Parcostella's Core Implosion. I saw it with my own eyes. But why do you know?" She glared at Amatsu, enduring the pain.

The kimono man looked away.

"I don't have the time to explain all that. What you should know is we can't do anything against Tremolo like that. The sole reason she's clinging to this world is to kill her target."

“What does that mean?”

“Her pitch-black willpower won’t disappear even in the face of any attack. It might have the power to rewrite the physical laws of the universe… From what I’ve heard, not even Effulgent Magic can defeat it.”

“Not even Effulgent Magic?! Then we’ve got no hope!”

“No.” Amatsu shook his head. “There is one way. That thing is a monster powered to the limits to fulfill a simple objective. Which means it will disappear after achieving it.”

“And the objective is…?”

“Likely killing Terakomari Gandesblood. We could leave her here, and no one else will be hurt.”

“…”

Fuyao’s mouth went dry.

This man couldn’t be trusted, but he didn’t seem to be being facetious.

Yes, Tremolo was after Terakomari. The tentacles were against her and only her; they never showed any hostility toward Fuyao. They didn’t even care about her.

“Oh, that’s solved, then! Throw her down already!”

“I won’t let you.” Fuyao’s words were a surprise even to herself.

“Eep!” Cornelius tensed.

Amatsu turned back with a surprised expression.

“Why? Didn’t you want her dead?”

“She’s still a kid. She’s not ready to die.”

“But everyone else will be spared if we leave her here. Meanwhile, if we let Tremolo run free, lots of innocent people will suffer.”

“I won’t let you. And I won’t let Tremolo do that, either.”

She couldn’t let Terakomari die. She had no logical reason. She simply wanted her to live.

Fuyao had a plan to solve it, too. An ace up her sleeve. A gamble only she could take.

She had no reason to run anymore.

Fuyao came to a halt.

“It’s weird, you know? I hated her to death until just the other

day, but now I don't feel the tiniest speck of that."

The rubble creaked and cracked. The monsters roared.

"The world would be better off with her alive rather than me. I realized this when she saved me."

Fuyao turned around.

Terakomari would save a lot of people in the future.

She would shine light on the hearts of so many.

Nobody else but her could do it.

So Fuyao had to use the last of her strength in this moment.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Fuyao nodded vigorously.

The barricade broke. The tentacles approached.

She trembled. She held down the shaking with sheer willpower and chanted: "Core Implosion: Inari-Avatar Reflection."

Poof!!

Fuyao's appearance immediately changed.

The foxgirl became a small vampire.

"Tell Terakomari I said thanks," Fuyao told Amatsu and Cornelius, turning only her head toward them.

A farewell.

"Tell her it wasn't so bad."

☆

Amatsu ran for the exit with the wounded Terakomari in his arms.

A terrific battle began behind him.

Tremolo had mistaken Fuyao for her target. The chances of the real Terakomari being hurt had plummeted. Now the question was whether they could heal her.

"…"

It was unavoidable.

Only Fuyao could do it.

Sacrifice the few for the sake of the many—Amatsu had done that

countless times before.

And if she was fine with it, then it was pointless to worry about it. So he had to convince himself to keep his legs moving.

"Awful. This is just awful."

Amatsu shuddered.

However, Cornelius's comment wasn't aimed at him.

"I'm not sure even Dr. Kuya could heal wounds this bad. What do we do?"

"Can your Core Implosion do anything about it?"

"Are you suggesting I craft a Divine Instrument for healing? Look, the tools I make aren't omnipotent. But I guess I'll try…"

"Please."

Cornelius looked at him suspiciously.

"Are your expectations that high for Terakomari or something?"

"Not really. I just don't want people dying."

"…Mm-hmm."

All lies. This girl's power was essential for Karla to arrive at a peaceful future.

Only Terakomari Gandesblood could illuminate people's hearts and transform the wicked world encroached in miasma.

After a while, the exit appeared before them.

They had to run to the hospital first. He jumped out into the light, when…

"B-B-B-B-B-BROTHER?!?!"

"!"

…a familiar voice hit his eardrums.

It was then that Amatsu realized he was caught up in a string of bad luck.

There she was, Kakumei Amatsu's cousin and Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise: Karla Amatsu.

Her fingers trembled and her face went red as she stared at him like she was hallucinating.

Upon further inspection, there were some familiar faces accompanying her.

Koharu Minenaga of the Kidoshu and Crimson Lord Sakuna Memoir. Along with multiple government VIPs and even his coworker

Kilty Blanc.

He had heard they'd sent a survey team to the Netherworld, but he had no idea they had already reached Neoplus.

"Koharu, are you seeing this?! That's my brother, right?! Am I dreaming?! I'm pretty sure I'm awake! Could you pinch my cheek?! O-o-o-ow, ow, ow, ow! I'm not dreaming! That really is my brother! My dear brother!"

"Pipe down. Yes, it's me."

"Huh! I-I'm sorry…"

Karla shrank back, red all the way to her ears.

"There's bigger news here." Koharu tugged on her master's kimono. "Things aren't looking good."

"Th-they certainly aren't! He yelled at me… He thinks I'm noisy! How do I recover from this?!"

"There's no recovering from that. But I wasn't talking about you—look."

"Huh?"





Sakuna Memoir screamed and walked up to him.

Then Karla noticed her, too: the beat-up vampire in Amatsu's arms.

"Ms. Komari?!"

"Yes. Tremolo knocked her out."

"Ms. Komari… Stay with me, Ms. Komari…! She's bleeding so much… Whoever this Tremolo is, I'm going to kill them… They'll pay, they'll pay, they'll pay…"

Sakuna gnashed her teeth, with tears in her eyes.

The rest reacted similarly; it was a natural response to seeing so much blood. Normally, injuries such as these wouldn't heal without a Dark Core.

Amatsu pushed Sakuna aside as he stepped forward.

"Move. Cornelius will treat her at the hospital."

"Wait." Karla stood before him, a serious look on her face, her eyes brimming with determination. "I'll heal her. My Core Implosion can save her in a flash."

"Don't. That will shave down your soul. Do you remember what happened to the previous Goddess?"

"Still! I don't care if it shaves my soul! I can't just stand back and watch as my friend suffers!"

"But…"

"Step aside, Brother. Only I can do this."

There was no stopping her.

Karla's eyes gleamed scarlet. Translucent mana enveloped Terakomari's body, and her wounds began to visibly heal.

☆

"Huh? Where am I…?"

When I came to, I found myself lying on a makeshift bed, staring at the dusky sky.

I carefully sat up. Nothing hurt. Weird. Hadn't Tremolo beaten me

to within an inch of my life with her Core Implosion? There was blood on my clothes, but my body was in perfect shape.

I was looking around in confusion when…

"Ms. Komari!"

"Gweh!"

…an impossibly pretty girl the color of silver squeezed me tightly.

There was a hint of chill to her skin.

My coworker and friend Sakuna Memoir buried her face in my chest and sobbed.

"…Huh? Sakuna, is that you? What are you doing here…?"

"I'm so glad… Ahhh… Ms. Komari… You smell so nice… I don't want to let you go…"

"Are you really Sakuna?!"

Is she acting like the sicko maid, or am I losing it?

In any case, what's the current situation? What the heck happened?

"Karla healed your wounds. In exchange for a bit of her soul."

I heard a grumpy voice.

I snapped my head up. There he was—Karla's brother, Kakumei Amatsu.

Karla was standing next to him. And it wasn't just those two. There was also Karla's retainer, Koharu; Cornelius of Inverse Moon; and a few soldiers I was pretty sure I'd seen somewhere before.

What's going on? Am I dreaming?

"Brother." Karla puffed out her cheeks. "I told you I don't care about that. Don't worry yourself. Ms. Komari, are you okay? Does anything hurt?"

"No, I'm super…"

"Good. Using Waving Moment was the right choice."

Now it all made sense. Karla had used her Core Implosion.

How could I ever repay her? There was no question I would've died without her. Patting Sakuna's head as she clung to me in tears, I looked at Karla.

"But why are you here? I don't remember you two coming to the Netherworld…"

"We came here to search for you and Ms. Nelia. We'll give you

the specifics later. Better to talk somewhere more relaxing, yes?"

"Sure…"

"The threat has passed for now. Don't you worry about anything. Please get some rest."

"…"

Threat passed. Yeah. I'm healed now, so it's…

Ba-thump. My heart raced.

…Wait. It's not over yet.

How didn't I notice earlier? Someone was missing.

Where was the foxgirl who'd fought by my side in Star Cave?

A dreadful feeling overtook me.

I screamed, "Fuyao?! What about Fuyao?!"

Everyone blinked, taken aback.

"F-Fuyao? You mean that fox…?"

"She might still be in danger!"

I shoved Sakuna aside and stood up.

I looked around frantically. One of the people here refused to look me in the eye. The kimono-clad Peace Spirit—Kakumei Amatsu.

"Amatsu! Do you know anything?!"

"…No. I haven't seen her."

"That can't be…"

"Ms. Komari, he's lying," Sakuna said, a serious look on her face. "I can tell. His constellation wavered a little."

"You heard Sakuna! You know something, Amatsu!"

"…"

His silence was telling. Something had happened.

I couldn't stay put. My reason and instinct were both telling me to book it. I bolted from where I stood and headed toward Star Cave.

"Wait." Amatsu grabbed my arm. "Her efforts will be wasted if you go now. Stay here and rest."

"I can't do that!"

I swept him aside and ran.

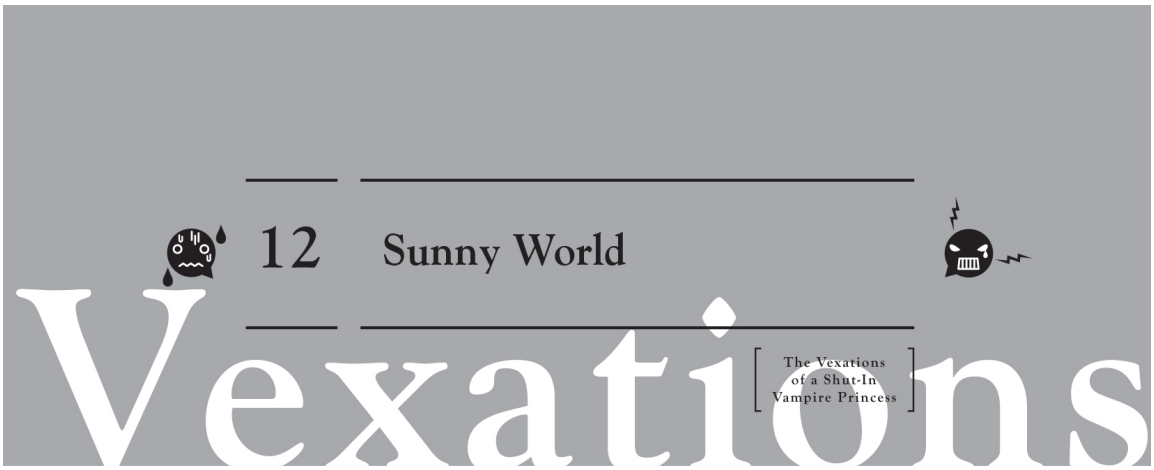
Karla and Sakuna hurried behind me.

It was obvious that Fuyao was in danger.

I had to save her.

Just like she'd saved me.

As strange as it might sound, she was a kind girl. She deserved the help.



She had thrown many into the pits of sadness. The prime example being the villagers of Lunar.

What would they think if they learned Fuyao had become a terrorist who went around spouting some nonsensical motto about not killing anyone who wasn't ready to die?

They would begrudge her. Want to kill her.

Maybe it was for this moment that she had survived, Fuyao thought in self-deprecation.

To know the cruel truth, to be plunged into the pits of despair by Tremolo's words, and to wield the blade to her death with her chest full of regret. A perfect ending for a wicked murderer, wasn't it?

"Die."

Fuyao swung the Null Night Blade again and again against the tentacles.

"Fuyao! I got you this sword for your birthday! Use it to get rid of anyone who gets in your way!"

"The Null Night Blade? That's a weird name."

"C'mon! It fits you perfectly!"

Her Highness had gifted her this Divine Instrument.

She tore one of the tentacles into miasma dust.

But just the one.

Tremolo's grudge did not weaken; it only grew stronger and stronger, more and more sinister, without limit.

Where were these tendrils even coming from? It was like she was fighting against the world itself.

A black blade scratched her shoulder. She endured it with all her soul.

Fuyao's role was to die as Terakomari, but she would not go down without a fight. She intended to soak the Null Night Blade in as much of the monster's blood as she could.

Fuyao turned around and ran farther into Star Cave.

The tunnels were full of debris and hard to traverse.

She looked for an open space where she could really let loose.

"Guh!"

A tentacle tackled her from behind.

She just barely managed to block it with her blade, but she was unable to dampen the impact of the attack and was blown away.

She was sent hurtling outside the cave, landing among dry fields and abandoned houses.

The spiteful evening light shone down on the ruins of Lunar Village, gouging her heart.

It was her fault her village had ended up like this. And for that same reason, she had to make Star Citadel pay. They showed no regret at taking the lives of countless people, and they were continuing to spread misfortune everywhere.

Even the biwa bard, already dead by her own hand, was now an actual monster that couldn't be reasoned with.

Yet Fuyao got the impression Tremolo was satisfied at having fulfilled her duty.

Only Tremolo had been able to choose her ideal death. Beyond revolting. Beyond unbearable.

Fuyao had to put an end to her.

The tentacles scraped Star Cave's exit as they charged.

Fuyao raised her katana to counter.

She repelled one of them and cut into another, but yet another stabbed her shoulder.

Her vision flashed white, and the phantom of Terakomari Gandesblood manifested by the Inari-Avatar Reflection nearly vanished.

She stood firm. It would all be for nothing if her Core Implosion stopped now.

She had to fight as Terakomari Gandesblood and die—no, win as Terakomari Gandesblood.

Tremolo's specter let out a shrill howl.

The tentacles rampaged and ravaged the houses of Lunar Village.

Fuyao leaped from spot to spot, dodging them.

Somehow, she had to find the monster's weak point.

Could she kill the thing if she found and broke a core somewhere in its body, like with the Varmints? She observed the tentacles' movements with that in mind. Yet no matter how hard she squinted, she could find no light of Mandala minerals. The tendrils were made of the willpower of sadness but in a fundamentally different way from the Varmints.

They had no weak point.

A new tentacle appeared every time she cut one. The enemy would not relent until she was dead.

Amatsu was right—Tremolo Parcostella's absolute willpower had materialized an invincible monster.

But…

Even then…

She hadn't the slightest intention of letting herself be slaughtered.

If this thing didn't have a weak point, then so be it—she would just have to keep on swinging her sword until it was dead.

"Your style is too heads-on for someone with a shape-shifting ability. I think you should try being slyer."

Tryphon's words came to mind.

He'd been right—she was too direct. But she knew no other way to fight.

She wielded her sword simply and killed those she ought to kill.

She thought it was what she had to do.

She fought madly, with all her being, so she could exact revenge for Lunar Village, to create a world where people could choose when to die, and so her brother and her father and her mother to tell her she had done a good job. This was Fuyao Meteorite's way of life.

"…!"

She felt dizzy as she landed on the mayor's house.

Perhaps she had shed too much blood. The moment this thought crossed her mind, a tentacle lashed out at her from afar.

A shock.

Another shock as she crashed into the ground.

The tentacles gathered like flies to trash.

Fuyao scrambled to her feet, but she lost her balance and tumbled down.

She had no time to breathe.

The tentacles converged overhead and drew a spinning pentagram.

Cloing. Cloing. Cloing.

The vilest stars to adorn the twilight sky.

The moment she was about to lose consciousness, they charged to end the life of their prey.

☆

I ran.

I ran frantically to where Fuyao was.

Thick, black miasma filled Star Cave. My Core Implosion had neutralized some of it earlier, but now it once again looked like something out of a nightmare.

Why had I blacked out?

Getting stabbed in the belly was nothing.

I should've endured it and fought by Fuyao's side.

I had been powerless at the most important time. After the Vampire Riots and the Matrimonial War, I should have learned that activating my Core Implosion didn't necessarily solve everything. But sucking Fuyao's blood and being wrapped in sunlight had made me feel childishly omnipotent, and I'd gotten carried away.

Fuyao would probably deny it and say I had done nothing wrong.

I knew blaming myself wouldn't solve anything.

It was just escapism. A little trick to try to erase my overpowering fear of the grumpy foxgirl being in danger.

I tripped.

Karla and Sakuna screamed from behind me.

Then I noticed all the blood staining the Mandala minerals on the ground. As well as golden hair. Fur from her fluffy tail. That soft tail I was thinking of formally asking if I could touch later.

Despair crossed my brain. Still, I gritted my teeth and stood up. A scrape on my knee was nothing. The only thing on my mind was Fuyao.

Fuyao. We had finally become friends.

It wasn't fair for things to end like this.

Please be safe.

You did your best.

You don't have to suffer anymore.

So please…

☆

It was a miracle she was still conscious.

Or perhaps she was already crossing the river Styx.

"Koff!"

Blood spurted out of her mouth.

She was surprised to see she held the Null Night Blade in her hand even then.

Inari-Avatar Reflection was still activated, too. She just managed

to keep the form of Terakomari Gandesblood. Her willpower was stronger than she expected.

And yet she lacked the physical power to stand.

The wicked tentacles writhed from overhead.

So this is as far as I get.

All energy and spirit gone, Fuyao gently closed her eyes.

Thinking back on it now, she had traveled a wild path.

After her hometown had been destroyed, she had resolved to get revenge and trained every day to become stronger. She met Spica La Gemini, joined the vicious terrorist group Inverse Moon, and dedicated herself to killing to change the world.

For a world where everyone could choose their place to die.

For a world where no one would die an unreasonable death.

But Fuyao Meteorite's convictions were a sandcastle.

The people of Lunar would be speechless if they saw what she had become. A murderer who fought in vain. They must be scorning her from heaven.

Brother… Mom… Dad…

Her family was gentle to the end. And it was she who had put an end to them.

She wanted to meet them again. To go back to those days.

But that wish could not be granted. She had already set foot on the path of a killer. She didn't have the right to show her face to her family.

Cloing. A switch flipped.

Now you're showing up…?

Fuyao's other personality had gone quiet ever since they reached Neoplus.

There was nothing she could change at this point, though.

…?

But there was something off about her.

She was supposed to take over control of her body the moment their personalities switched. But she hadn't done so this time.

Confused, Fuyao opened her eyes and saw something mystical.

It was the nostalgic sight of the village.

Green pastures and twirling cherry blossoms.

The thatch-roofed houses were in perfect condition, and smoke was billowing from some of their chimneys. The skies were clear, not a star in sight.

Where… am I?

Perhaps it was an illusion. Otherwise, it would be impossible for her to see Lunar Village so vividly.

Had she already lost it?

"Hello! It's the first time we're meeting like this, isn't it?"

She realized someone was standing right next to her.

A beast-folk with fox ears and tail. Fuyao Meteorite. But not her "head" personality—the "tail" who was born from that tragic day.

At first, there had been multiple "tails," but with the passage of time, they had unified into a single alter.

"You… What's happening here?"

"I remembered," the "tail" said, an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. "I didn't pop up from within you. And I'm not a side effect of Inari-Avatar Reflection, either. Ever since that day, I—we—have been by your side."

"What do you mean…?"

"Having a lot of personalities in one body is too much of a burden, so we unified for a while. So I'm not you. The *cloing* that echoes every time I show up is a warning, a way of keeping you from forgetting the tragedy of that day…"

"What are you getting at? You're not an offshoot of me?"

"I am… But I'm not Fuu."

Shock. Her voice, her mannerisms, her bearing matched someone in her memory.

"Tail" Fuyao burst into cherry blossoms.

A gentle breeze blew.

Perplexed, Fuyao stood there a while before a gentle voice called her name.

It was her dead brother.

"Fuu, you did your best."

"B-Brother…?"

Fuyao retreated a couple of steps out of fear.

She couldn't understand the logic behind it, but there was no

doubt: Her dead brother was right in front of her.

His gentle smile, his kind eyes—everything she had torn apart with her own hands.

"Don't be scared," he whispered, using the same tone as he did back then. "I'm with you. I'm your brother."

"B-but…"

"I've been watching right next to you. We were in the 'tail.' We have watched over you ever since the day Lunar Village was destroyed…"

That…that couldn't be possible.

It was her brother. It was his voice, his smell, his kind willpower.

"Fuu, I know you might feel guilty over what happened, but you shouldn't blame yourself."

"Wh-what are you saying?! I killed you…!"

"Terakomari agrees with us. It's not your fault."

"But—but I…"

Core Implosion was the power of the heart.

Just then, it clicked. Fuyao Meteorite's shape-shifting power of Inari-Avatar Reflection must have been born from the guilt she harbored in her heart. She hadn't destroyed her village. She hadn't killed her family. The guilt was in the bottom of her heart, but she could not accept it. And it manifested as a wish to become somebody else.

And yet, had she really needed to look away?

The villagers of Lunar forgive me?

"Look," her brother said, and she examined her surroundings.

People were gathered all around, each and every one a familiar face. The departed people of Lunar, who had once treated her younger self so kindly.

They had resided within her this whole time.

They had supported the sole survivor of that tragedy from the shadows and waited for the moment her wish came true. Waited for the day she struck back against Tremolo Parcostella—against the villain who'd ruined their peaceful lives.

The second and third personalities that manifested in Neoplus came from members of this crowd.

What an incredible bunch. To leave so much of their willpower in this world even after their death.

"Fuu, you don't have to force yourself." Her mother gave her a glance full of concern. It brought Fuyao back. Her mom had always worried about her. "I don't care about revenge. I'm happy if you're happy. Everyone thinks the same."

"Wh-why…? Didn't you want me to defeat Tremolo…?"

"That's secondary." Her father smiled. He'd always played soldier with her in the garden. "As parents, we just want you to live. You can go take revenge whenever you're free. If it hurts for you to do that, you can run away."

"But…"

"And look, you're so hurt already. You're almost over here. But everyone here will take on the pain when you can't anymore. We've been with you all this time for that. If you stop fighting and run away, you'll still have a chance."

Every one of them turned into specks of light—willpower that soaked into her body.

Tears spilled from her eyes.

She had fought alone all this time. She thought she had no one who would stand with her.

But that was wrong.

There were plenty of kind people in the world.

She could not stand to let people like them be lost in another tragedy.

And so…because of that…

…she had to keep going.

"I'm sorry. I have to fight. I have to pay you back for your kindness."

"Fuu…!"

The villagers were taken aback.

Fuyao smiled to put them at ease.

"Don't worry. I won't die. I feel the power everyone here has given me. With this, I can take down that bard."

"Really?" Her brother sighed in resignation. "Okay. You should be fine with Terakomari by your side, too."

"Terakomari…?"

"It was thanks to her that we were able to come to the surface."

Her father and mother became light and merged with her.

Only her brother remained.

"Her light was blinding. It clears the haze in people's hearts. Just act like she does, and there'll be nothing to worry about."

Bright sunlight filled the area.

A soft, warm energy like Terakomari's that purged the black miasma.

And it was coming from inside Fuyao herself.

Core Implosion: Inari-Avatar Reflection, *Rising Sun*.

Light mana overflowed.

It was the very same power the crimson vampire emanated.

Yes. She wanted to be just like her.

Inari-Avatar Reflection was a mirroring miracle. It did not originate from guilt. It was the ultimate shape-shifting technique, nurtured from her desire to kill her enemy.

With this, she could take back the broken sun.

She could illuminate the world like Terakomari.

"Go, Fuu. Make everyone's dreams come true." Her brother smiled.

Fuyao nodded.

After that, her brother, too, became light, a smile on his face to the end.

A mélange of color embellished the world.

The color that was lost had returned.

Fuyao thought seeking strength was like an art.

And she was right. True strength was the kindness to sympathize with other people. A harmonious heart could paint a monochrome world in vibrant color.

The journey to that realization had been long indeed.

She was eternally grateful to the people of Lunar.

Fuyao Meteorite had inherited their willpower, their dying wish.

She had nothing more to worry about.

Then her vision went white.

Her view of Lunar Village blurred and vanished.

Then Fuyao returned to hell.

A mud-colored evening sky.

Shining stars and a cold, melancholy breeze. The veil of night was already descending.

Vicious tentacles writhed above her head. This was the specter of Tremolo Parcostella, nemesis of Lunar Village.

Fuyao used her katana as a cane to prop herself up.

The next moment, tremendous mana of light spilled out from deep inside her.

The tentacles above were vaporized. The dirty sky was bleached.

It was sunlight itself. An exact copy of Terakomari Gandesblood's extraordinary Blood Curse.

The tentacles flinched for a moment.

In this purified landscape, bathed in light as strong as the noontime sun, Fuyao raised the Null Night Blade and glared at her enemy.

No more lingering sorrow. She needed simply destroy the fool before her eyes.

Blood spurted. Every sense in her body went numb.

Even the willpower of the people of Luna had not been enough to heal her completely.

Still, her heart and mind were clear.

"…Have I kept you waiting?"

Wicked stars belonged in the night.

With this blade, she would make the night null.

"Come, Tremolo Parcostella. Are you ready to die?"

There was no response in words. Instead, the tentacles came at her like a tsunami.

Fuyao raised her Null Night Blade and countered. Most of the tendrils had melted away in the light of the sun, but a few stubborn ones dug through the veil of light with the spite of tenacious revenge.

A swing of her sword. Tentacles trounced. Another swing of her sword.

Unlike the Varmints, the tendrils lacked a core of Mandala minerals.

In that case, she simply had to keep mowing them down until they stopped.

"Ugh!"

A tentacle shot from her blind spot and whipped her back.

She leaped, trying to ignore the pain by yelling, and used the ruins of a house as footing to slash the tentacles in the air.

She failed to take down all of them, and they gouged her in the shoulder.

Yet she felt no fear. Terakomari's light kept her heart warm.

"You should live the way you want."

Of course. This was Fuyao Meteorite's way of life.

She only had to fight to the death for the sake of that vampire.

For the sake of Lunar Village. For the sake of the world.

The tentacles were endless. She cleared them away with a beam of light, but they kept creeping up from every gap like cockroaches.

A cut on her cheek. A full-body slam on the ground. Perhaps she couldn't master her imitation of Terakomari's Core Implosion.

But that did not matter.

She had to end this here and now.

"It's over for you."

Fuyao clenched the hilt of her katana and jumped high.

Slash. Slash. Cut. Blood spurt. That attack wouldn't work. The pain was already out of mind. Still, it hurt. But she couldn't afford to feel it. This was all for world peace. For the kind people of Lunar. For Terakomari. For a world where the weak could also choose when to die. Slash. Slash. Slash. Slash.

It was already night.

All of a sudden, Fuyao heard everything break.

☆

The land was bathed in quiet moonlight.

The air was still, as though everything was dead.

I slashed through the silence by shouting her name.

Then I finally reached Lunrar Village. The tragic settlement ravaged by a merciless star.

Tremolo's willpower was already gone. The only thing there were ruins that had been further reduced to rubble. Then I noticed the trunk of a cherry tree glowing faintly in a corner of the village. A weak light like a flame in the wind. It seemed like it was waiting for me.

Fuyao Meteorite sat down, leaning against the cherry tree.

I stumbled my way to her as fast as I could.

She's all right! She defeated Tremolo! My foolish hope was broken in no time.

I noticed something was wrong with her.

She was drenched in blood, naturally. Her shoulders and belly and thighs were gouged beyond repair.

The Null Night Blade was stabbed into the ground at the base of the tree. Broken in half.

My mind froze for a moment.

The light enveloping Fuyao converged, revealing her surprisingly peaceful expression. That exact moment, a warped scream jumped out of the pit of my gut.

"Fuyao?! Are you okay?!"

I realized the stupidity of my question as it left my mouth.

Not even the best doctor in the world could heal this.

"Terakomari… You're safe."

Fuyao recovered consciousness. Her hollow eyes fell on me, gaze seemingly not able to fully focus.

"Fuyao! What in the world…?"

"…Don't worry. I took care of Tremolo. It was all thanks to you and the people of Lunar."

There was no trace of Tremolo, for sure.

The wicked miasma covering Star Cave had faded.

Fuyao looked down and spoke hoarsely.

"Take it. I managed to snatch it. I think you'll be able to make good use of it."

By the base of the tree shone a gem—one of the Netherworld's Dark Cores.

Fuyao had put a nail in the coffin of Star Citadel's ambition.

But I didn't care about the Dark Core.

"F-Fuyao, your injuries…"

"Don't mind them. I'm not recovering from this."

"Yeah, you are! Karla's here! If we ask her—!"

"I'm not recovering even if you heal my wounds. I've fulfilled my duty."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Infinite fear took hold of my heart. Fuyao's oddly calm expression told me she had nothing else to do in this world.

"I thought I was worthless, but maybe that wasn't quite true. In the very end, I was able to finish her off with everyone's help. I exacted my revenge. And…I protected your life."

"Yeah, you're amazing, Fuyao. You were more amazing than I—"

"No. You deserve to live more than I do."

"That's not true!"

I involuntarily grabbed her right hand.

I was shocked. It was so cold.

I was smart enough to understand what the coldness meant.

"No… You also deserve to live… You got your revenge. Now you can spend your days in peace. I'll get you inari sushi! Let's eat some more together…"

"You're so kind." Fuyao smiled in disbelief. "And that's your weapon. Your kindness saved me. You can stand up to those wicked idiots talking about ending humanity."

"But…"

"I want to ask you something. Do you mind?"

She looked me directly in the eye.

Overwhelmed, I nodded. "Y-yeah."

"I defeated Tremolo, but there are still more idiots out there.

There are still villains who will hurt others and do as they please. I can't do anything about them. But you can. I know you don't like to fight. I'm sorry to ask this of you, but please, stop them. Give color to this gray world with your kind light."

"O-of course. I'll do everything I can…"

"Thank you."

Blood spilled from her mouth.

I panicked and staunched it with my hands.

Fuyao Meteorite stared at me and put on a smile of satisfaction like I had never seen from her before; it fit so well on her face.

"If you'll take up my dream, then there's nothing more I can ask for… I'm counting on you, Terakomari."

"…!"

Fuyao's willpower vanished. I could tell.

I called her name again and again and shook her battered body.


©riichu



But the foxgirl would not open her eyes.

She fell asleep, embraced by the cherry tree of the former Lunar Village.

A scream darted out of my throat.

It was wrong. Beyond unfair.

Fuyao did the best she could. It was only recently that I got to really talk to her, and even now, I didn't really know her—her likes and dislikes, her interests, her character. But I knew how hard she had fought. I knew how she'd gave it her all for me.

It wasn't fair for such a gentle girl to meet such a brutal end.

Star Citadel—how could they be so wicked?

They had made a little girl bear a suffocating sin and had forced her to live a life of war.

All her pain and all her suffering were their fault.

They had to pay.

They had to—

"—Ms. Komari!"

I saw the light of hope.

Karla. Time-manipulator Karla Amatsu was coming.

I clung to her in tears and begged her over and over to turn back time for Fuyao. She was taken aback for a moment, but in the end, she accepted my plea.

Core Implosion: Waving Moment.

Translucent mana gently enveloped Fuyao's body.

Time began to turn back.

Her wounds closed, the blood on her clothes evaporated, and all filth vanished from her in a flash.

The same old Fuyao Meteorite lay asleep.

I desperately called her name.

Now she was saved. Hope filled my heart, and without a shred of doubt, I called her name again and again and again and again.

I realized something was wrong.

Fuyao showed no reaction.

She didn't open her eyes. She didn't say a thing. Her body was cold. And her heart was quiet.

Why? Why?!

As I sat there, frozen in despair, Karla hesitantly spoke up.

"It's no use, Ms. Komari… Her heart is no longer here."

"…"

Sakuna, Amatsu, and Cornelius ran up to us.

Then I understood.

The heart was one's base.

The heart had the power to bend the world to one's will.

This girl had protected me, had fulfilled her revenge, and had entrusted me with her dream. She had done everything. There was nothing left for her to accomplish.

Without her heart, Fuyao could never return.

I cried.

The tears flowed endlessly.

"I want a world where everyone can choose when they die."

"It was just a figure of speech. What I mean is, we'll settle this score eventually."

"Now I feel as though I understand why so many people gather around you."

"If you'll take up my dream, then there's nothing more I can ask for…"

"……"

Sinister stars shone in the night sky.

Perhaps I shouldn't be wasting time crying. The murderers who had made Fuyao end up like this were still out there, doing what they wanted without a care.

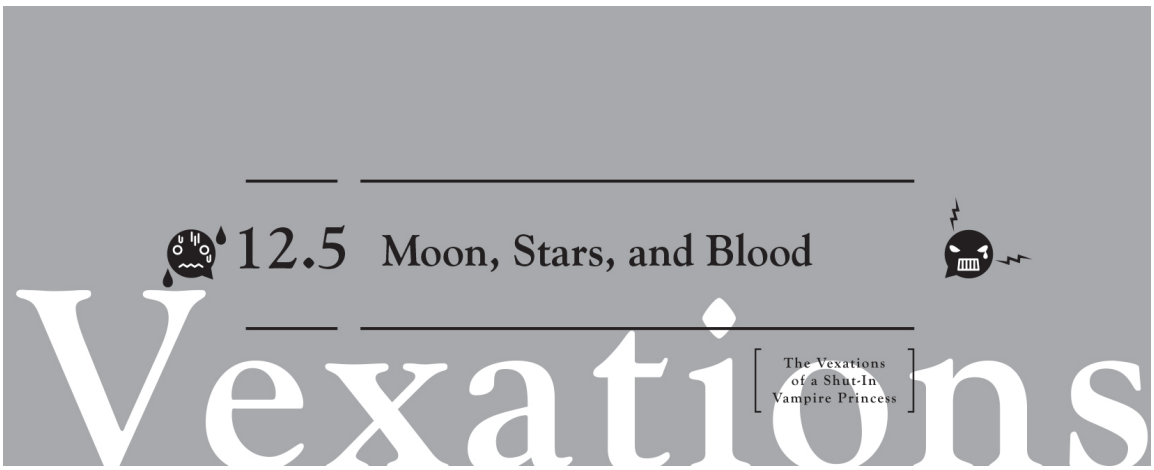
Yet I couldn't stop myself from wailing as I clutched Fuyao's body tightly.

Karla, Sakuna, and everyone else kept quiet.

The wind blew.

The cherry tree rustled, and a cherry blossom fell on Fuyao's cheek.

Her expression, illuminated by the light of the moon, was as peaceful as it could be.



The sound of the corpse echoed.

Elegists conveyed their sadness to their close ones upon meeting death.

Cloing. Cloing.

The melody of the eerie and nosy biwa bard shook Nefty Strawberry's eardrums. The tune drove home the fact that death came to all equally, even the peppiest. It cast a dark cloud on the future of Star Citadel.

Nefty always thought they could never see eye to eye, but even so, they were allies and friends.

"Crazy daredevil…"

Nefty endured the twinge in her chest as she looked down at Tremolo Parcostella, who had fallen by the underground lake in Star Cave.

She loathed herself for underestimating Terakomari and her fellows.

Tremolo was already dead by the time Nefty arrived. If only she had gotten to her sooner. At the very least, she could have prevented her from using Necrocurse Mandala.

"Yusei, Tremolo's dead." Nefty spoke to the bunny plush under her arm.

Yusei's body was dormant somewhere outside the Netherworld. The only way she could contact her followers was by sending her

willpower to an object. The plushy was her current medium of choice.

"You don't need to cry, Nefty." Yusei spoke via telepathy using willpower. *"You can meet again even after death. That is what Star Citadel is here for."*

"But…"

"It's okay. Don't worry."

"But…! Tremolo and Nerzanpi are gone! Can we really make our wish come true…?"

The three members of Star Citadel were apostates, ostracized by the world.

They thought they would earn true bliss if they followed Yusei.

But how did that explain the pain in her chest?

Would her heart break eventually if she kept at this fight?

"You see." Yusei smiled softly. *"Bliss is found after overcoming hardship. Enterprise is always painful, but if you can endure this pain, you will be saved. Now, take the biwa."*

"…"

Yusei was always right.

Nefty carried Tremolo's biwa on her shoulder as told.

The Divine Instrument was called the Strings of Asterism.

It was able to store willpower inside it, and Tremolo had used it to collect miasma to provide to Yusei.

"Oof, that's heavy! Sheesh… Just how much miasma did she get?"

"We might be able to defeat Yulinne with that."

"Yulinne…?"

"She appears to have discovered my location."

"What?"

"She used large-scale detection Effulgent Magic. It crossed the walls of the world… She probably used a Netherworld Dark Core to pull that off."

Yulinne Gandesblood—the woman who was fighting to destroy Star Citadel's ambitions.

She had been unable to even locate Yusei…until now.

"I'd appreciate it if you could come back soon. We may have to fight Full Moon next."

"Isn't that too much? Full Moon, Terakomari, Observatory… How are we gonna deal with all of them?"

"Don't forget about Inverse Moon. I encountered Spica just now and failed to kill her by a hair. She is strong."

"See? It's gonna be tough."

"It will. So don't abandon me, yes, Nefty?"

"…I'll head over there, but what about Neoplus?"

"Leave it. Best to get rid of it now that it's useless."

"*Tsk…* All that work to become governor, wasted…"

Nefty walked away with the biwa on her back.

More and more foes were seeking to impede the stars. But she had to keep going.

For her fallen comrades.

And for her own happiness.

☆

A few days passed.

The world was in turmoil. Every country declared war on one another. Inhuman strife happened in every corner of the Netherworld, bringing suffering upon many of its inhabitants.

Amatsu and Kilty said it was a parting gift from Star Citadel.

They disappeared after Tremolo's defeat.

Upon their departure, the tension Tremolo had been building all over the world snapped, bringing about new conflict. Star Citadel had always had the means to plunge the Netherworld into further chaos. In the end, we had been dancing in the palm of the bard's hand all along.

As for the foxgirl who'd defeated the bard in question…Fuyao Meteorite… She accomplished her purpose and took her last breath in quiet.

Her funeral was already over. She was buried in the land of the former Lunar Village.

Karla's powers could not bring her back.

The regret of having to part ways with her like this tore me apart.

Desperation clouded my mind, the thought of things having ended differently if only I did better running through my head.

But I couldn't keep crying like a kid forever.

Fuyao had entrusted me with the future.

No matter how sad or pained I was, I had to stand back up with a will of steel.

That was my job as a Crimson Lord.

I could not shut myself in.

"…Thanks for everything. I'll take over from here."

It was night.

I was gazing at the stars from the hotel window.

The air in the Netherworld was glum. Muddy like a fish tank that hadn't been cleaned in days.

A consequence of endless conquest popping up all across the world.

"Terakomari, what's got you so glum?"

Someone came up behind me. The vampire with the weird hat, Spica La Gemini.

"Spica? Your wounds are healed already?"

"I was never hurt. I was just sleeping."

Spica took a lollipop out of her pocket and put it in her mouth.

She sat down on the chair next to me and haughtily crossed her legs while looking up at the night sky.

From what I heard, Yusei had staged a surprise attack on her in Star Cave.

Lingzi and Tryphon had managed to get her to the surface, and she had been so badly wounded that she was unconscious for a while.

Yet she'd said it was nothing just now. Obviously, it was something.

I was impressed by that human display of emotion. And in awe of Yusei's power for nearly taking down Spica La Gemini.

"Dang it! Good grief!" Spica yelled, uncannily loud. "They're unbelievable! Star Citadel makes a mess out of the Netherworld, and

then they just up and disappear! Tremolo's defeat alone doesn't even bring this to a draw!"

"Yeah…"

"They killed Fuyao! One of my valuable underlings who understood my ideals! My superstrong bodyguard! But hey, maybe it was for the best!"

I stared at her in disbelief.

"I mean, she got to choose her ideal death! She must be glad to have been able to fulfill Inverse Moon's belief of a meaningful death! Yup, that's the world I wanted to make! One where anyone could die a perfect death like Fuyao!"

"Spica…"

"I knew that girl was going to be great! She died in satisfaction like the Lunae who came before her… Good. Very good. I thought she would leave after she got her revenge, but hey, she didn't. She didn't… It wasn't quite like I thought… Fuyao…"

Drops.

To my surprise, Spica was crying.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised.

Fuyao was her dear comrade. This only showed me this girl had a normal heart—one that could grieve for her friends' deaths.

I had no idea what to say to her.

So I just stated the facts.

"Fuyao was a good girl."

"She was."

"She worked hard to fulfill her dream…"

"She did!!"

Blam!! The nearby table broke in two all of a sudden.

Spica had punched it.

"OWAAAH?!" I screamed, standing up. "Wh-what're you doing?! They're gonna make us pay for that!"

"Star Citadel are destroying the world! Who cares about a table!"

"Calm down! Don't break anything else!"

"I know! I know breaking stuff won't solve anything." She cracked her lollipop with a bite and glared bare hostility at the stars in the sky. "Let's call it a draw. But next time, we'll win. They'll die, in the

name of Fuyao. And you better help me, okay?"

"…Hey." I asked plainly what was on my mind. "Are you a good guy? A bad guy? Make it clear…"

"Asking that's a waste of time! Just keep in mind I'm a pacifist working to quell the war in the Netherworld."

"I see…"

What a weird vampire.

Amatsu said that Spica would kill me in the future.

Perhaps the day when we clashed would come.

But for now, we had to work together. To be honest, I was scared, but I knew this girl seriously wanted to change the Netherworld.

Spica crossed her arms in annoyance.

"Let's forget about Yusei for now and focus on doing something about the Netherworld."

"Doing what how?"

"The God Slayer Tower."

"Huh?"

"The huge white tower in the middle of the Netherworld, very near Lumiere, where I used to have my base."

I knew the place. I had seen the real thing with Nelia.

It was a world heritage site, if I recalled correctly.

What about it…?

"The tower is sealed, so no one can enter, but the seal can be broken by gathering the Netherworld's Dark Cores."

"The Dark Cores sealed it…?"

"Yup. That's what their job is, to seal the God Slayer Tower."

Great power came from reuniting the six Dark Cores.

While the Dark Cores in the other world functioned as the basis for each nation, the ones over here were meant to seal that white tower.

"…And what happens if we break the seal?"

"I can reunite with my friend." Spica narrowed her eyes in nostalgia. "She hid in there after losing the fight with those fools. The Dark Core seal is meant to protect her. And we promised to meet again six hundred twenty-two years in the future. She's a

medium who can see the future, so I'm sure our promise will come true."

"Uh-huh…"

"And if my math is correct, it'll be six hundred twenty-two years this year. With her power to see the future, we can plan out the road map to world peace. So I have to gather the Netherworld's Dark Cores, unlock their function, unseal the tower, and meet back up with her."

"Hold on… Is this that friend you got separated from a long time ago who you mentioned?"

"Yes. And the seal disconnects her from the flow of time. She's still alive."

"This world was created six hundred years ago at the hand of the strongest vampire—the Scholar. She used her power to bring order to the world of chaos. She lives even now in the God Slayer Tower at the center of the world… Or so they say. I don't believe it. There's no way someone can live for six hundred years."

"Huh? Wait…? Is that the Scholar who created the Netherworld…?"

"No, that's me! She's not the Scholar; she's the Shrine Maiden. It wasn't me who was sealed; it was her. The legends got some details wrong."

"…The Shrine Maiden? You mean, like, the one in Lumiere Village?"

"Is there any other Shrine Maiden? She was the first Shrine Maiden in the Netherworld and one of the founders of Lumiere."

"Wait… So she's Colette's ancestor??"

"Want me to kill you?"

"Why?!"

"She didn't have kids! She was just a girl of the founders' clan."

I was so confused, I wanted to scream.

I needed some time to make sense of everything.

I had to take notes if I wanted to keep track of everything.

One thing was clear now, though: There was still a way to bring peace to the Netherworld.

In my journey, I had seen so many people suffer. Spica and I had to give it all we had so that they could live in peace.

And that was also the job Fuyao had entrusted to me.

"So everything will be solved if we break the tower's seal. Can I believe you on that?"

"Why would I lie?! We're allies now!"

Spica's blue eyes shone bright like stars.

Maybe it was because she had cried just a moment ago…

…but I felt like I could trust her now, if only a little.

"…Okay. I'll help you."

"That's the spirit!" Spica grinned.

Maybe there were some similarities between me and her.

Our methods were different. Our natures were different. But it felt like we were shooting for the same destination.

Then let's work on this together! Determination filled my chest as I shook Spica's hand.

☆

Meanwhile…

Vicious heat burned in the Powapowa Kingdom.

What the heck was the Powapowa Kingdom? It was one of the many nations in the Netherworld. A paradise for beast-folk that broke off from Lapelico two hundred years in the past.

A crowd gathered in the palace's plaza.

Everyone yelled with full emotion.

A revolution had taken place tonight.

The evil king hoarding all the bananas and grapes had been taken down, and his luxurious residence had been taken over—nay, purified—by a single Sapphire.

"People of the Powapowa Kingdom! Here ends our class struggle!

There will no longer be a privileged class who wrongfully monopolizes all wealth! Now begins an era of a fair and equal society!”

At the palace’s balcony stood proudly one girl: Prohellya Butchersky.

The beast-folk gazed at her with respect, admiration, and emotion. With every sound of her gallant words, a wave of “Lord Butcher! Lord Butcher!” spread through the crowd.

“Worry no more! Let us begin with the redistribution of the fruit! There’s enough for everyone, so don’t start fighting, okay?!”

“”””Lord Butcher! Lord Butcher! Lord Butcher!”””

“I’m no lord. Call me General Secretary… Well, I guess changing the system just now would only make you confused! Well then, I shall succeed the Powapowa Kingdom from today on! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaa!!”

“”””HAAAAAIIIIILLLLL!! Lord Butcher!! Lord Butcher!! Lord Butcher!!”””

The crowd’s fervor knew no limits.

People jumped and leaped, stood on their hands and head, and ran around yelling their lungs out.

Prohellya grinned, looking at it all from above.

Her plans for world domination were steadily making progress.

It had been a few weeks since she had been thrown into this strange world with two suns.

She still didn’t know how to get back. She would rather have made a triumphant return to her homeland right away, but she had been unable to stand back and watch vain conflict take place. And so, she decided to change this rotten world herself and rose up in arms.

There were forty-two countries in the Netherworld.

Prohellya had already conquered three of them.

“This is the symbol of our ruler! Please put it on!”

“Very well.”

The lemurman handed her the crown.

While she struggled to put it on over her hat, she heard a sluggish voice from behind: “Prohellyaaa… Are we really gonna do

this another thirty-nine times? I'm tired already…"

Catgirl Leona Flatt.

She was drifting along with Prohellya and fighting by her side.

"Don't say that. I'll give you a high post at the dawn of my unified government. How about Minister of Fish?"

"No, thank you… Are you serious about this world domination thing?"

"Of course! This world is all wrong!" Prohellya clenched her hand into a fist. "Have you heard that all the big countries keep fighting one another trying to make themselves even bigger?! The innocent are suffering for it! I have to put a stop to it!"

"Sounds like something Terakomari would say. That reminds me, the newspapers said the Aruka Kingdom was looking for her… You think she's all right?"

"I'm sure she's all right. She's probably becoming the ruler of another country, just like me, as we speak. So maybe we won't have to take over all other thirty-nine of them."

"By the way, that crown does not look good on you."

"Well, duh. I am not royalty. I'm the representative of the proletariat."

"I didn't mean it like that…"

Prohellya yawned.

It was already late at night. That coup had worn her out. Better think about Powapowa's management the next day. So she took a step away, when suddenly, she saw something shine in Leona's hand.

"Hey, what's that?"

"This? The king of Powapowa had it. I took it because it looked pretty."

"Don't monopolize the treasures. That must be redistributed to the people one day, to… Hmm?"

Then Prohellya noticed something strange about it.

It was a sphere that shone like a star. It emanated mana. Mana that she remembered having seen before.

It reminded her of the music box her subordinate Pitolina had—the Harmonic Hoarfrost.

☆

"I can't stay put anymore! Let's go after Komari!"

Lumiere Village was recovering quickly with the help of the government.

Nelia Cunningham turned around and shouted to her friends Villhaze and Esther Claire.

They had finally finished healing. The doctor had released them from the hospital. It was time for them to set off. They had to save Komari from the terrorists.

"Ummm… But where could she be…?" Esther timidly asked.

"I don't know. We'll just look for her everywhere."

"Yes. We must crush Inverse Moon and feed them to the plants as soon as possible. They must be torturing Lady Komari… They'll pay… They'll pay… They'll pay…"

"Eep!" Esther shrieked.

Villhaze was acting like Sakuna (crazy mode).

"They'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay they'll pay…"

"B-but, Ms. Vill, didn't you say that she…that the Wicked God Slayer wanted to use her?"

"She'll die if I put her down. That okay with you?"

"I'll make good use of Terakomari."

"So I think the Commander is unharmed. We should refrain from acting rashly…"

"…Esther, you do know what Inverse Moon has done before, yes?"

"E-erm, but it was also an Inverse Moon person who saved me from the rubble. A fox beast-folk."

"Fuyao Meteorite?"

"Yes! I have to thank her…"

Mmph. Villhaze clasped Esther's face.

"Eep?! Wh-wh-what are you doing, Ms. Vill?!"

"Don't even joke about thanking a terrorist. You're too

straitlaced… I shall corrupt your purity…”

“I—I wouldn’t say I’m that pure. I—I… You’re scaring me…!”

“Did you forget, Esther? It’s Seventh Unit tradition to charge ahead without a thought. We don’t need a plan, and we don’t need to exercise caution. We must reach Lady Komari as soon as possible. I have to slurp her thighs right now, or I’ll die.”

“What happened to the coolheaded Vill I knew?! Please wake up! And could you let go of me already…?!”

Nelia ignored the rambunctious duo and fell into thought.

Esther was right. Acting rashly wasn’t smart. But wait too long, and you might miss an opportunity.

If only they knew where Inverse Moon was…

As the vexations tormented her, she heard a lively voice:

“There you are! Vill, Nelia! You got a visitor!”

A girl the color of the sky approached from afar—Colette Lumiere.

Her balance was off after she had lost her right arm, but thankfully, she had managed to survive her injuries.

Beside her was the visitor in question—a tall girl with long hair fluttering in the wind.

Whom could it be? She couldn’t think of anyone who would come visit them here.

“Huh…?”

Nelia was speechless.

Why? How? No, it makes perfect sense.

She’s supposed to be here in the Netherworld.

Colette puffed out her chest and said:

“You won’t believe it! It’s *the* Hero of Twilight! It’s a shame Terakomari isn’t here to see her… But isn’t it amazing?! The strongest mercenary of all is here!”

Esther and Villhaze ceased scuffling to turn around.

Crimson eyes, golden hair, and that same old gentle look on her face.

Nelia froze.

She had yearned to see her again for so long, but now that the woman was here, all the words Nelia had prepared for her disappeared into another dimension.

Ignoring Nelia's reaction, the woman smiled.

Nelia felt her heart grow warm.

Yes. With her here, there was nothing to worry about.

The Komari Club had a bright future ahead of them.

※

After six hundred years, the world had grown twisted.

All order was on the brink of collapse.

The Dark Cores were used to seal the Scholar, weaken the forces of the Netherworld, and give infinite mana to the Foreworld.

The first world's balance had been maintained by the Dark Cores for six hundred years.

But now?

Inverse Moon's mobilization. Star Citadel's encroachment.

And this fiend's—Terakomari Gandesblood's—transformation of people's hearts.

An unbelievable revolution had happened while they had slumbered.

He could not allow such wicked people to roam free.

Even the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core had been broken.

"They must be eliminated."

A single Immortal walked the roads of the Netherworld.

Down the ruins of a destroyed city.

Large-scale battles were taking place in every corner of the Netherworld.

The source of the commotion, Star Citadel, had already vanished.

But Terakomari and Spica remained in the Netherworld.

Spica La Gemini was especially dangerous.

The first world's order would crumble if no one stopped her.

He had to protect the Dark Cores.

The Immortal clenched his hands and walked ahead.

He declared war on all enemies of order.

“Let’s continue where we left off six hundred years ago. Observatory will put things back in order.”

Night fell on the Netherworld.

Every time one tried to change the world, the power to bring it back to normal was activated.

This Immortal was one member of Observatory—guardians of the Dark Cores.

The ancient fools awakened to kill Spica and Terakomari.

Afterword

Hello. Kotei Kobayashi here.

This volume was about Inverse Moon—until it became mostly about Fuyao.

Fuyao first appeared in Volume 4, and she's had a surprisingly active role since. Don't forget she slashed Komari's belly open. Naturally, her appearance is a result of the characters and their relationships updating as the volumes go on, but considering one big theme of this series is the idea that "people can make up after clashing and talking to each other, no matter their past," I think it was inevitable that this would happen. In the end, Fuyao and Komari had to join hands and ultimately entrust each other with their dreams. I think it's important to forgive your enemies. Komarin always says things like "Die" or "You will pay," but I think she's just going with the flow in those scenes. So…could there have been a future…where Komarin and Tremolo became friends…? No, maybe that's impossible… (And now I'm undermining the whole theme.) By the way, Fuyao's character isn't the only one who has changed from my initial plans as the story has taken shape. The same thing happened to Sakuna and Amatsu and Prohellya and Kilty. I'm excited to see where they go from here. I hope you will join me on this journey.

Volume 9 ended up being dark and depressing, so I want to make the next one a bit lighter. Look forward to Volume 10!

Now for some special thanks.

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Let’s meet again.

Kotei Kobayashi

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